Our Mission

AAC&U advances the democratic purposes of higher education by promoting equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education.
EQUITY, INNOVATION, AND EXCELLENCE

In July 2021, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched a comprehensive strategic planning process designed to promote collaboration among stakeholders—AAC&U’s staff and board of directors as well as faculty, staff, and administrators at our member institutions—with the goal of developing a shared vision of the association’s future. In the process, the board approved a revised mission statement to serve as the foundation for the 2023–27 Strategic Plan. It is a plan that foregrounds AAC&U’s values, purpose, and scope within the current societal context and landscape of higher education.

The State of Higher Education in 2022

Multiple intersecting challenges have impacted social institutions in recent years, yielding a landscape for higher education in 2022 that is vastly different than just five years ago.

Disruption of the Postsecondary Pathway

COVID-19 created unprecedented disruption to social institutions across all sectors of society, including higher education. The worst pandemic in more than a century presented a resilience test that challenged every aspect of college and university operations, from admissions, curriculum delivery, and assessment to retention, finances, and student well-being. And while most institutions have returned to their pre-pandemic operations, the long-term consequences of the pandemic have been dire. Globally, school closures impacted over 1.6 billion students in 192 countries, eroding the postsecondary pathway. Women and girls suffered the most because of skyrocketing teen pregnancy rates, increased sex trafficking, and domestic violence.

In the United States, enrollment in higher education declined for five consecutive semesters from spring 2020 to spring 2022. Public four-year colleges and community colleges, which disproportionately serve low-income students,
students of color, and older students, experienced the largest drops. The prospect of a lost generation of college students prompted US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona to call for a new vision for college excellence focused on college completion.³

**Skepticism about the Value of College**

Though the demand for higher education traditionally increases during economic recessions, a whirlwind of surveys in 2020 revealed that, of those who stopped out of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant number of students did not intend to return.⁴

Mounting student debt, rising tuition, and emerging job prospects that build upon short-term corporate training and certificates contribute to growing skepticism regarding whether a college degree is worth the investment. The consequences of shifting perceptions about higher education are far-reaching. The transition toward a more transactional view of a college degree, characterized by tuition in exchange for jobs, parallels a **dramatic decline in public funding of higher education**.⁵ Federal student aid fell short of covering the increases in tuition and other college expenses, making higher education less affordable and therefore less accessible. Colleges and universities were concomitantly forced to cut programs, increase class size, and engage in the overreliance on adjunct faculty, who are overstretched—often working at multiple institutions simultaneously.

These financial challenges served as a backdrop for a growing economic, racial, and ethnic segregation in higher education and were enhanced by political polarization and an intolerance for difference that spiked during the pandemic.

**Inequity and Intolerance**

While colleges and universities demonstrated remarkable innovation and ingenuity in the transition to online and remote learning, heightened awareness was brought to the food and housing insecurities experienced by students at all types of institutions. The already tenuous status of low-income students in the US was exacerbated in the five months that followed the initial closure of campuses, as more than fifty-one million Americans filed for unemployment benefits due to job losses.⁶ The expansiveness of the digital divide was simultaneously showcased as students without access to computers and high-speed internet, or who struggled with limited data plans, began lining up for college-supplied electronic devices and filling areas designated to facilitate digital course delivery. In the US, this shift in curriculum delivery took a particular toll on Black and Latinx⁷ students and on Indigenous Americans living on tribal lands.⁸

At the same time, racially motivated hate crimes surged in the US in 2022,⁹ accompanied by a new permission structure that both tolerates and encourages
overt acts of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and ableism. For our students, continued worries over financial security and fears of contracting a deadly virus are increasingly accompanied by psychological distress around mass shootings, recent judicial decisions infringing on reproductive health care and environmental protections, increasingly frequent climate disasters, the possibility of a nuclear catastrophe resulting from Russia’s unprovoked attack on Ukraine, and belonging uncertainty due to divisive identity politics.

**Threats to the Autonomy of Higher Education**

In the US, there has been a proliferation of government attempts to restrict what can be taught on college campuses and by whom, fueled by a populist trope in which professors are portrayed as elitist, out of touch with the practical matters of everyday life, and pushing a liberal-progressive agenda. The ramping up of rhetoric that positions colleges and universities as indoctrination mills, intent on pushing the country in a dangerous direction, both mirrors and helps shape public opinion.\(^\text{10}\)

State legislators and governing boards have politicized long-held standards for free speech and freedom of expression in academia, constraining vital societal discourse on pressing questions relating to American history, society, and culture. Legislative restrictions on freedom of inquiry and expression violate the institutional autonomy on which the quality and integrity of our system of higher education depend. Moreover, these restrictions strike at the core of liberal education as a philosophy of learning intended to free the mind and deepen inquiry as foundations for revisioning a more just and inclusive society. The imposition of political restrictions on college and university curricula undermines principles of shared governance and substitutes ideologically motivated government dictates for subject matter expertise, threatening the integrity of the academic enterprise and our society’s democratic future. Concurrently, the US Supreme Court has acted in ways that may subject colleges and universities to additional state restrictions in the future, including restrictions on campus health services, the education and training of medical professionals, and the consideration of race in admissions.

Far from being elitist, a liberal education can unleash the potential of those otherwise most likely to be excluded from full participation in civic and economic life.
Mental Health Challenges

The upheaval of recent years has had a detrimental impact on student mental health.\(^{11}\) According to the 2022 *Gallup-Lumina Report on the State of Higher Education*, emotional stress and exhaustion are dramatically impacting student optimism about completing college.\(^{12}\)

Between 2013 and 2021, the number of students who meet the criteria for having mental health problems doubled, with the largest increases reported among American Indian/Alaskan Native college students.\(^{13}\) Faculty and staff, too, report high levels of burnout, stress, and exhaustion.\(^{14}\) Given that mental health is a strong predictor of retention and student success, these statistics signal a critical need for colleges and universities to provide increased access to mental health services, enhance diversity among mental healthcare providers, and address hidden biases in campus policies and practices contributing to current mental health challenges.

The Opportunity

While these challenges are likely to persist in the years ahead, they bring with them an enormous opportunity to reaffirm and resituate the applicability of our mission for a new higher education horizon. A liberal education provides the foundational knowledge and skills that empower students to advance the common good through responsible and engaged citizenship in local, national, and global contexts.

As institutions recover from the impact of COVID-19, renew commitments to equity and community engagement, and reimagine the future of postsecondary education on their campuses, delivering a high-quality liberal education equitably will be more important than ever. AAC&U is committed to serving our member institutions and individuals in this new landscape.
AAC&U is recognized nationally and internationally as the leading association dedicated to advancing the quality, vitality, and public standing of liberal education and inclusive excellence in higher education. Founded by 150 college presidents in 1915 as the Association of American Colleges, in 2022 AAC&U represented nearly 1,000 colleges and universities of every type and size, in countries around the world. In 2021, the organization changed its name to the American Association of Colleges and Universities to reflect our growing international membership and to reinforce that AAC&U’s efforts to ensure liberal education and equity are, together, the global foundations for quality, access, and student success in higher education.

Perhaps nothing better exemplifies the challenges of this moment than controversy over the very language of “liberal education.” This time of turmoil and change, increasing scrutiny on the value of a college degree, and growing stratification in and across colleges and universities, is also accompanied by expansive ideological divides on the meaning of “liberal.” While these challenges are likely to persist in the years ahead, they bring with them an enormous opportunity to reaffirm and resituate the applicability of our mission for a new higher education horizon.

AAC&U’s vision in 2022 is reflected in What Liberal Education Looks Like, which details the enduring relevance of liberal education for addressing the most pressing issues of our time while positioning students for success in an unpredictable future. While What Liberal Education Looks Like was written before the pandemic, its tenets remain remarkably relevant. Now, more than ever, the following principles, realized through an abiding commitment to equity, will

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guide AAC&U’s endeavors in advocating for and supporting a higher education landscape fundamentally changed in the past five years. These principles are:

• Liberal education can happen for any student at any institution. A commitment to equity demands that institutions, including faculty, staff, and administrators, embrace that each student brings unique strengths to learning and that a shared responsibility for student success entails ensuring each student is empowered to succeed.

• A contemporary liberal education supports the skills needed to contribute to a thriving democracy that advances social and racial justice locally, nationally, and internationally. A commitment to equity recognizes that power and access to democracy have been unequal historically and persist today through a host of mechanisms, including restrictions on voter access, misinformation, and expressions of hate in all forms. The skills of citizenship are endemic to liberal education, but the differential ability to express those skills must be part of every student’s learning.

• Liberal learners possess open minds and are liberated to think for themselves. A commitment to equity demands that institutions foster a sense of inclusion and belonging that enables the sharing and discussion of ideas, theories, and perspectives that prepare students to engage in and beyond the classroom.

• The outcomes and experiences of a liberal education are the most effective tools by which to achieve career success and social mobility. A commitment to equity demands curricular experimentation that is asset-based and culturally relevant such that liberal learners may apply essential knowledge and skills in ways that allow them to adapt their unique interests and talents to envision a range of career paths.

• Liberal education values integrated learning, the connection of learning across the curriculum and cocurriculum. A commitment to equity supports institutions in helping students intentionally link their curricular and cocurricular experiences with guidance and mentorship by faculty and staff such that the breadth of each student’s liberal education is fully documented and understood.

• Meaningful assessment of a liberal education examines students’ abilities to apply and integrate outcomes and skills across disciplines and between experiential and academic environments. A commitment to equity demands that assessment of liberal education be attentive to gaps in demonstrated outcomes and that evidence be positioned for improving students’ learning, belonging, and success, particularly for minoritized students.
AAC&U’s goals for 2018–22 reaffirmed a commitment to advancing quality and equity in undergraduate education and promoting the value of a liberal education as integral to preparing students for work, life, and global citizenship. AAC&U’s previous strategic plan, *We ASPIRE: Advancing Student Performance through Integration, Research, and Excellence,* guided the association through essential work. It enabled AAC&U to thrive through a time of unprecedented turmoil and change, increasing scrutiny on the value of a college degree, growing stratification in and across colleges and universities, and expansive ideological divides. Through the implementation of *We ASPIRE*, AAC&U:

- **Expanded its research** agenda and research partnerships, building evidence to support the advancement of liberal education.
- **Expanded capacity**, adding TRHT Campus Centers and institute offerings, and expanding the VALUE Scoring Collaborative and sponsorship funding.
- **Accelerated advocacy and outreach**, expanding member focus and engagement and revising the association’s branding, website, and overall messaging to make our core values more transparent, embolden communication strategies, and energize stakeholder engagement.
- **Changed the association’s name** and bylaws to acknowledge, continue, and accelerate inclusion in membership; individuals may now join as members, and international institutional members are now welcome as full members.
- **Revised the association’s mission statement** to foreground the democratic purposes of higher education.
While the higher education landscape is markedly different as 2023 begins, AAC&U’s previous strategic plan leaves a solid foundation on which to build. We have continued a robust agenda of campus projects and expanded research that supports the development of best practices within higher education. We have expanded capacity through grant funding and sponsorship support. And we have broadened engagement through diverse programming intended to engage a breadth of stakeholders across higher education.

Alongside our member campuses, we have also learned what it means to pivot to a virtual environment. We have gained unexpected insights into new ways to connect even at a distance, and opportunities make our programs more accessible. Institutes, conferences, and the annual meeting offered virtually have garnered robust participation and positive reviews from participants, and some campuses have indicated that virtual programming is more accessible than in-person programming since participation is possible without the time and financial investment of traveling. Staff, too, have reported more opportunities to meet virtually, plan new programs, and innovate existing programming within the less rigorous travel schedule of the pandemic. Increasingly, new staff hired by AAC&U are adept telecommuters or hybrid workers, providing opportunities to draw talent from a global pool of leaders.

We are inspired to embrace innovation out of necessity and out of the belief that higher education can meet this moment of transformation as an invaluable resource for serving the greatest common good. This time of change affirms AAC&U’s ongoing mission, for there is no better time to trumpet the value of liberal education and the imperative for equity and excellence.

As outlined in the Boyer 2030 Commission’s report, released in fall 2022, the “equity/excellence imperative” is “a belief that excellence and equity are inextricably intertwined, such that excellence without equity (privilege reproducing privilege) is not true excellence, and equity (mere access) without excellence is unfulfilled promise.” This blueprint for undergraduate education at research universities matches AAC&U’s own imperative for higher education writ large, and the eleven provocations of the Boyer 2030 Commission are reflected within AAC&U’s strategic commitments for the next five years.
To thrive in our mission to promote equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education, AAC&U commits to four strategic objectives to guide the association’s work for the next five years.

1. **Sustain an association prepared to thrive and champion liberal education globally.**

AAC&U will continue to develop and enhance the human, financial, and reputational resources necessary to advance the association’s mission. We will focus on thought leadership in our expertise areas, to drive training and practice in higher education.

Key activities to advance this objective:

- **Integrate** AAC&U’s work and the communities we serve by aligning programming in ways that consolidate and invigorate offerings and create space for innovation.
- **Assess** engagement and financial impact across AAC&U’s multiple activities, to ensure that we are investing in the most impactful activities across the association.
- **Increase** staffing across the organization, to provide the human capital necessary to achieve AAC&U’s strategic priorities at a time of increased demand and opportunity for AAC&U’s leadership in higher education.
- **Implement** workplace policies and practices that support the physical, emotional, and mental wellness of AAC&U’s employees, respond to ongoing workforce changes touched off by the pandemic, and establish AAC&U as “the best place to work” in higher education.
- **Provide** an updated physical space to meet the changing needs of staff and member engagement.
2. Create a model for institutional transformation on campuses.

By 2027, AAC&U will lead institutions in creating strategic plans to drive institutional transformation. AAC&U will provide robust expertise to lead member campuses through change processes.

Key activities to advance this objective:

- Define institutional transformation through the lens of AAC&U’s work.
- Develop an adaptable, holistic model for guiding member campuses in institutional transformation.
- Identify effective strategies for engaging AAC&U member campuses in institutional transformation processes.
- Deepen and integrate engagement with members by engaging broad institutional teams around the world in campus transformation efforts.
- Build capacity on college campuses to design and implement institutional change.

3. Partner with educators and institutions to transform the student learning experience.

By 2027, AAC&U’s members will be clear and vocal about the value of liberal education, the importance of quality undergraduate education, and the imperative for equity. Equity will be framed as an opportunity, and liberal education will be understood as the best preparation for work, life, and citizenship.

Key activities to advance this objective:

- Lead activity to transform the student learning experience at all levels to engage all students in high-impact, active, and applied learning.
- Engage educators in innovative professional development to advance student learning and success for all.
- Provide assessment resources to generate rich and robust evidence of student learning.
- Catalyze and convene communities and networks of change agents committed to improving student learning in and beyond individual institutions.
- Empower educators and institutions to create student experiences that fully embrace the knowledge, skills, backgrounds, and perspectives of all students.
4. Fully engage our members around the world.

By 2027, AAC&U will be the primary professional association of choice for presidents, faculty, and other campus professionals and a top priority for funders and sponsors. AAC&U will be a global association with global membership that serves all sectors of higher education. AAC&U will use its convening power to enable collaboration and the thought leadership of members.

Key activities to advance this objective:

- **Engage** in internal research and development to learn more about AAC&U’s individual and institutional members around the world, what they value, and how the association can deliver maximum value through member benefits.

- **Enhance** AAC&U’s visibility globally and across all sectors of higher education.

- **Develop** and provide membership benefits that are accessible and relevant to the global higher education community, and that encourage cross-country curricular and cocurricular transformation and professional development.

- **Launch** intentional campaigns to recruit, engage, and retain members and develop related metrics to guide AAC&U’s recruitment and engagement efforts and measure success.

- **Provide** opportunities for members to network across institutional types, globally, and with industry and community partners.

Higher education’s tremendous and swift change in response to the challenges of the past five years has revealed decisively the inaccuracy of some of the widely held assumptions about higher education. Higher education is not fatally sclerotic and resistant to change. Liberal education is not a luxury, but a necessity for cultivating dispositions that enable productive dialogue and democratic debate. Far from being elitist, a liberal education can unleash the potential of those otherwise most likely to be excluded from full participation in civic and economic life.

The four strategic objectives outlined in this strategic plan frame AAC&U’s commitment to continuous innovation, improvement, and expansion. Building on our learnings through the past years of disruption and in collaboration with partners around the world, AAC&U looks forward to leading within a new era of higher education characterized by equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education.
NOTES


4. Four out of five students reported facing significant disruption from both increased financial pressures and the need to balance work and school. Among these, approximately 40 percent said they were either “less likely” or “significantly less likely” to re-enroll in college. See “COVID-19 Stopout Student Survey: Key Insights,” ReUp Education, May 7, 2020, https://reupeducation.com/blog/covid-19-stopout-student-survey-key-insights.

5. Forty-five of forty-nine states spent less per student on higher education in 2018 than they did during the Great Recession, and the published tuition rate at four-year public institutions rose 36 percent from 2008 to 2018. See Michael Mitchell et al., Unkept Promises: State Cuts to Higher Education Threaten Access and Equity, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 4, 2018, https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/unkept-promises-state-cuts-to-higher-education-threaten-access-and. Illinois was excluded from this analysis, due to incomplete appropriations data.


8. Tribal lands are the least connected areas in the US to high-speed internet services. See Brian Howard and Traci Morris, Tribal Technology Assessment: The State of Internet Service on Tribal Lands, Arizona State University’s American Indian Policy Institute, fall 2019, https://aipi.asu.edu/sites/default/files/tribal_tech_assessment_compressed.pdf.


10. In 2022, at least 137 educational gag orders in twenty-eight states were introduced to impose restrictions on teaching and learning related to race, racism, gender, and other so-called divisive concepts. Such bills have already become law in eight states, with forty-seven new proposals explicitly aimed at prohibiting or limiting discussions of systemic racism, anti-racist theory, and White privilege in higher education. Twenty-six of these legislative proposals threaten reductions in or elimination of funding, the removal of tenure, and the termination of faculty found in violation. The result is an undermining of academic freedom, shared governance, and the public purpose of higher education. See Jeremy C. Young and Jonathan Friedman, America’s Censored Classrooms, PEN America, August 17, 2022, https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms.

11. Nearly three-quarters of college and university presidents now cite student mental health as their primary concern, surpassing financial stability. See College Presidents Say Challenges Remain as Students Return to
12. Three-quarters of students in bachelor’s programs and two-thirds of adults seeking associate degrees considered dropping out in fall 2021 due to emotional distress. These numbers represent a 34 percent increase since 2020. Additionally, more than half of first-time students entering college last year reported recent increases in mental and emotional exhaustion. Not unexpectedly, then, student optimism about their first year of college dropped substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 60 percent of entering students “very optimistic” about their first year of college in May 2021, and only 42 percent “very optimistic” in August 2021. See The State of Higher Education 2022 Report, Gallup, 2022, https://www.gallup.com/analytics/391829/state-of-higher-education-2022.aspx.

13. Between 2013 and 2021, there was a 135 percent increase in depression and a 110 percent increase in anxiety among college students. The largest increases in depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and other mental health problems were reported among American Indian/Alaskan Native college students. And although there was a 22 percent rise in Arab American students experiencing mental health issues, there was an 18 percent decrease among this student population in requests for treatment, likely due to increased isolation and decreased access. See Sarah Ketchen Lipson et al., “Trends in College Student Mental Health and Help-Seeking by Race/Ethnicity: Findings from the National Healthy Minds Study, 2013–2021,” Journal of Affective Disorders 306 (2022): 138–147, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.03.038.


