With *On Solid Ground*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) introduces a nationwide effort to examine direct evidence of student learning across higher educational institutions in the United States. This report represents the first attempt to reveal a landscape of student learning on key learning outcomes—critical thinking, written communication, and quantitative literacy—that both educators and employers agree are essential for student success in the workplace and in life. This effort—the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) initiative—is the result of several years of collaboration with the State Higher Education Executive Officers association (SHEEO) and the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning (MSC), the Minnesota Collaborative, the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) Collaborative, and nearly one hundred public and private, two- and four-year colleges and universities.

AAC&U owes a debt of gratitude to all of these institutions that represent the diversity of American higher education: large and small; urban and rural; comprehensive, research extensive, and liberal arts; religious and secular; and open access and selective. At its core, the VALUE initiative is a collaboration among individual faculty, academic and student affairs administrators, state higher education executive offices and policy makers, assessment experts, and national and regional higher education associations.

Beyond the broadly inclusive collaboration described above, the VALUE initiative breaks new ground by basing its assessment of student learning achievement on the actual work that students produce in response to assignments from the formal instructional curriculum in whatever institution(s) the student attended. Rather than a standardized test divorced from the curriculum, VALUE draws evidence from the actual courses and teachers at an institution, assessing the learning artifacts (papers and assignments) produced by students to demonstrate their achievement of specific learning outcomes. Finally, the VALUE initiative utilizes the expertise of trained higher education faculty and other educators from the participating institutions to judge the quality of the student work in relation to widely accepted standards for each of the learning outcomes as captured through the faculty-developed VALUE rubrics.

What follows is a preliminary picture of the landscape of learning in higher education in the U.S. via an exploration of the results for the initial VALUE assessment demonstration year (2015-2016) for the MSC, as well as the broader results from the VALUE initiative (2014-2016) to date. The results must be viewed as preliminary because they are not representative of all higher education institutions, all states, all students, or all learning outcomes. However, this set of nationwide results does represent the first direct evidence of student learning across twelve state systems, ninety-two institutions, and samples of students who had completed 75 percent or more of the requirements for receipt of an associate or baccalaureate degree.