



# Foreword

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The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is to promote liberal education for all students—“to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education.”<sup>1</sup> In 2005 AAC&U launched Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) to promote a twenty-first-century liberal education. LEAP defines the Essential Learning Outcomes that should be the goal of undergraduate education, including broad knowledge, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning.

Integrative and applied learning is the Essential Learning Outcome that results from the development of knowledge, skills, and values throughout the undergraduate experience in all its aspects, including traditional classrooms, special programs, and cocurricular settings. Through integrative liberal learning, students adapt and apply what they have learned to new areas and problems just as they will need to in a quickly changing world. “[T]his capacity to integrate new and old experience, to adapt knowledge and skills to novel circumstances … protects our students from professional obsolescence and prepares them to face the unpredictable challenges awaiting them.”<sup>2</sup>

To promote this kind of learning and achieve these outcomes, AAC&U has endorsed high-impact practices: those research-supported pedagogies and programs that, when done well, have educational benefits for all students, especially underserved students. High-impact practices typically involve high levels of student engagement in academic research, writing, collaboration, and problem solving in a variety of settings, including cocurricular and community work. Taken together, these practices support an integrative and meaningful education that helps students make sense of their undergraduate experience, promotes their personal development, and enhances their capacity to be productive, responsible citizens.

As valuable as these practices are, however, they are not widespread enough and even where provided are often not woven into the fabric of institutions’ cultures and programs. In order to discover how to promote a broader and deeper embrace of integrative liberal learning, AAC&U looked to residential liberal arts colleges as institutions that are positioned to provide a high degree of intentionality about liberal learning and student development. The small scale of these colleges allows for the creation of close student–faculty relationships and high levels of student engagement. Intentionally designed academic and cocurricular programs provide numerous opportunities for students to increase the depth of their engagement with knowledge and values, develop skills in communication and problem solving, and synthesize their work across a variety of experiences. In addition, a residential community promotes many informal but still significant occasions for “lateral learning” in conversation and interaction with other students, faculty, administrators, and staff.<sup>3</sup>

Residential liberal arts colleges have some distinct advantages in providing an undergraduate education that is far more than the accumulation of courses and credits, but their purposes can also be relevant for a wide variety of institutions and for older as well as younger college students. Optimally, liberal learning should be an intentional, integrative, and empowering experience in which students reflect on and see the point of their

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1 Association of American Colleges and Universities, “Mission Statement,” accessed June, 15, 2015, <https://www.aacu.org/about/mission>.

2 Task Force for the Study of Undergraduate Education, *The Study of Undergraduate Education at Stanford* (Stanford, CA: Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, 2012), 13.

3 Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 54–57.



academic work: its relationship to cocurricular and community activities, and to the larger world and their place in it. As Andrew Delbanco puts it, “a college should strive to be an aid to reflection, a place and process where young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others.”<sup>4</sup> This is a goal for all college learning. But how do educators help students make connections between learning and life?

From 2012 to 2014, AAC&U, with support from the Teagle Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, worked with fourteen liberal arts colleges in the Faculty Leadership for Integrative Liberal Learning (FLILL) Principles and Practices project, exploring how they could provide ongoing faculty leadership to improve the coherence and integration of their work with students. These institutions included Allegheny College, Babson College, Bard College, Carleton College, Clark University, Colgate University, Mount Holyoke College, Skidmore College, Spelman College, St. Olaf College, The College of Wooster, Wagner College, Wellesley College, and Wheaton College. Schools were chosen because they had already demonstrated intentional and integrative approaches to their curricula and programs.

Nonetheless, these institutions recognized that extending and sustaining their work would require greater self-awareness and a strengthened role for faculty. The FLILL colleges worked on a variety of projects, ranging from broad curricular reforms to career preparation programs to exploring the role of cocurricular and community activities in promoting student learning. Equally important, these colleges focused on the crucial factor of faculty leadership, how faculty members defined their work and interacted with one another in making changes and improvements at their institutions such that the goal of integrative liberal learning was woven into the culture and practices of the institution. Project leaders understood that greater self-awareness of both formal and informal roles in promoting change is key to making improvements in curricula and programs to promote integrative liberal learning.

As the colleges explored different approaches to and different aspects of integrative liberal learning, certain common themes and ideas emerged about both the nature of integrative liberal learning and the faculty leadership needed to support and sustain it. In consultation with the faculty members and administrators involved in the initiative, Ann S. Ferren, AAC&U senior fellow, and David C. Paris, vice president of AAC&U’s Office of Integrative Liberal Learning and the Global Commons at the time, developed a set of principles, practices, and examples, drawn from the work of these institutions that embody an ideal of integrative liberal learning. The principles and practices of both integrative liberal learning and faculty leadership to promote it are central to the work of a residential liberal arts college, but these principles, practices, and examples can be adapted and applied in other undergraduate settings.

Two assumptions are central to this initiative and the principles emerging from it. First, *integrative liberal learning provides the greatest value for both the individual and society*. Integrative liberal learning does more than prepare students for a career; it provides the tools for personal development and responsible citizenship across a lifetime. The key elements of integrative liberal learning—an understanding of the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture, and society; mastery of core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; cultivation of a respect for truth; recognition of the importance of historical and cultural context; and exploration of connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to different communities—provide the basis for a full and meaningful life.

Second, *integrative liberal learning should be accessible to all on an equitable basis*. All students should be given the guidance and support they need to engage with and benefit from high-impact practices that promote broad learning, critical knowledge and skills, and opportunities to connect learning to real-world problems related to careers and citizenship. Currently, such an education is available mainly to more privileged students,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 15–16.



while first-generation students and those from underserved groups often receive less guidance and are steered toward narrower programs and courses of study. It is neither fair nor wise to have one enriching and empowering education for some while settling for constrained and limiting education for growing numbers of others seeking access to higher education.

This educational divide is especially unnecessary and unacceptable because we increasingly understand how to provide integrative liberal learning for all students. Research on a set of high-impact practices and emerging evidence on guided learning pathways mapping students' academic and personal pathways intentionally with high-effort assignments (writing, research, problem solving, practicums, major projects, integrative portfolios) indicates that these practices and pathways lead to increased rates of achievement, persistence, and graduation.<sup>5</sup> In addition, digital tools and resources increasingly allow students to gather information, build relationships, and construct personalized academic and career pathways across institutional settings. Thus, we have the knowledge and technology to serve all our students.

There is a broad consensus that the twenty-first-century economy will demand more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens with high levels of skills and knowledge and the ability to apply them to complex and fast-changing problems. The ideal of integrative liberal learning defined in this document suggests how colleges and universities can respond to and meet these needs for all students. It is our hope that faculty members at colleges and universities from all sectors will find these principles and practices helpful in providing coherent, integrated programs that promote quality liberal learning for all students.

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<sup>5</sup> See Ashley Finley and Tia McNair, *Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact Practices* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013).