Foreword

Digital educational innovations have recently been the focus of much charged rhetoric—from declarations that technological disruption will enable everyone to attain a college degree quickly and cheaply, on the one hand, to fears that such disruption will eliminate the need for faculty and put the majority of colleges and universities out of business, on the other. Thus far, the dialogue has largely been centered on the technologies themselves, their capabilities as well as the threats they may pose.

In *Open and Integrative: Designing Liberal Education for the New Digital Ecosystem*, Randy Bass and Bret Eynon reject this starting point, choosing instead to make “a robust twenty-first-century vision of liberal learning” the lens that focuses a vision of higher education in a digital world. While cautioning us against the impulse to assume that technology alone can solve the problems of higher education cost or access, they argue that we can only achieve a quality liberal education for all students by thoroughly integrating learner-centered and equity-minded digital technology into what we do. Student learning, student agency, and inclusive excellence must be the primary drivers for how and why digital innovations are integrated into higher education.

*Open and Integrative* was written in the context of AAC&U’s General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs) project, funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. A project devoted to a transformative redesign of the nation’s largest educational program could hardly ignore the ways in which liberal education needs to be integrated with the emerging digital environment, in ways that best serve student learning. This report is one product of the initial planning phase of the GEMs initiative, supplementing publications focused on general education as a whole, the frameworks needed for equity and inclusive excellence, and assessment.

Bass and Eynon frame the digital revolution in higher education as an inspiring design opportunity, asking, “What forms of liberal education are only possible now?” What might we imagine, if we were newly designing liberal education—for all students, in all majors and all types of institutions—in the context of the digital ecosystem?

Bass and Eynon use the term “digital ecosystem” to refer to the whole constellation of learning technologies—institutional and noninstitutional—that characterizes our contemporary life. Colleges and universities do not hold a monopoly on knowledge production and dissemination; they exist within an expansive environment of information and analytics. As the authors note, this reality requires higher education professionals to “separate the core practices of institutions that are most germane to their value propositions from the habitual structures that can be reshaped by opportunities offered by the new learning ecosystem.” Within the digital learning ecosystem, higher education is ideally a site focused around engagement, community and mentorship, and integration, in which the disparate and “unbundled” learning opportunities endemic to our constantly networked modern life can be “rebundled” to support an integrative vision of learning.
The current tendency to focus on platforms and profits rather than to design for engaged and integrative learning threatens to reinforce existing inequities in higher education, via a two-tiered system of unbundled (not to mention lonely and decontextualized) education for those without the means to pay for the guided, community-rich education that is in danger of becoming even more the purview of the privileged. When a new majority of diverse students is enrolling in college, allowing the digital revolution to perpetuate and further contribute to inequity in higher education is particularly unconscionable. Some of the arguments for unbundled options claim to stem from equity concerns (cost and access), but in fact studies show that systematically underserved students fare worse in unstructured, do-it-yourself learning environments, and they succeed in environments with strong advising, mentorship, and clear pathways to their goals—all of which require continued guidance from faculty and staff.

Bass and Eynon argue for a renewed commitment to ongoing professional development that can help faculty and staff learn not just about new technologies, but about pedagogies that take advantage of new understandings of learning that are made possible through those technologies. To fully exploit the potential of adaptive software, predictive analytics, e-portfolios, and other developments to improve student learning and agency, faculty and staff will need not to have their roles disaggregated, but instead to collaborate more fully. We need the digital environment to enable cohesive learning that is mediated by human judgment and connection.

Through understanding and negotiating the tensions and relationships between integrative and disintegrative forms of learning, between the explosion of unbundled information and the bonds of learning communities, we have a tremendous opportunity to re-center higher education on student agency and mentored guidance through inquiry-based learning and problem solving. The digital learning ecosystem can support this learner-centered focus by encouraging the shift of higher education resources away from routine tasks and simple knowledge transfer, and toward work on complex and unscripted problems, reflection and identity development, mentoring and community at scale, and integrative learning of all kinds. This is a move for which AAC&U has been arguing for decades, and that is crystallized in our LEAP Challenge to require Signature Work of every student.

Open and Integrative reminds us that a commitment to the core purposes of liberal education, and to our best understanding of student and organizational learning, must be our guide as higher education navigates the unpredictable digital environment.

Carol Geary Schneider
President, Association of American Colleges and Universities