

Introduction to *General Education Maps and Markers*

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The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is actively pursuing a mission-level focus on liberal education and inclusive excellence through Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that champions the importance of a twenty-first-century liberal education—for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality.

LEAP responds to the changing demands of the twenty-first century—demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens. The LEAP vision for learning applies to all forms of postsecondary study, including career, technical, and professional education as well as the

liberal arts and sciences, in all learning environments (face-to-face, online, or blended). Through LEAP, AAC&U makes the case that all students, especially new majority students—first-generation college students and students from historically underserved populations—should receive a truly liberal education through which they develop the twenty-first-century knowledge and skills essential for work, life, and responsible citizenship.

The GEMs general education reforms seek to empower all students to improve and enhance their lives through an engaged liberal education rich in meaningful problem-solving and integrative cross-disciplinary learning.

In order to meet the needs of our students and our society, AAC&U has launched a major national project, General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs). Through this LEAP project, AAC&U seeks to provide a broad-based, comprehensive framework based on five principles (see facing page) and related guidelines for reform of undergraduate education, beginning with general education.

In partnership with leaders from multiple institutions and with support from higher education organizations and other supporters and stakeholders, GEMs will help institutional leaders and educators redesign general education curricula and programs intentionally and systematically to help all students see the point and purpose of a liberal education and empower students to develop essential proficiencies that will help them achieve their aims, succeed in their chosen professions, and enrich their lives.

GEMs seeks to reverse the trend toward a two-tiered system of higher education that offers a horizon-expanding education to some and limited learning to others. The GEMs general education reforms seek to empower all students to improve and enhance their lives through an engaged liberal education rich in meaningful problem-solving and integrative cross-disciplinary learning.

THE GEMs DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

PROFICIENCY

Colleges and universities should provide clear statements of desired learning outcomes for all students. Similarly, general education, in all institutional and alternative settings, should provide programs, curricula, and experiences that lead to the development of demonstrable, portable proficiencies aligned to widely valued areas of twenty-first-century knowledge and skill. Students should achieve and demonstrate progressively higher levels of proficiency through problem-centered work on significant issues relevant to their interests and aims.

AGENCY AND SELF-DIRECTION

General education should play a critical role in helping *all* students understand, pursue, and develop the proficiencies needed for work, life, and responsible citizenship. Students should be active participants in creating an educational plan in which they identify and produce high-quality work on significant questions relevant to their interests and aims. Undergraduate education should enable students to understand the intellectual and personal capacities they are developing that will help them achieve their educational and professional goals, enrich their lives, and act in principled and constructive ways, both as individuals and in their roles in society.

INTEGRATIVE LEARNING AND PROBLEM-BASED INQUIRY

Students should develop and demonstrate proficiency through a combination and integration of curricular, cocurricular, and community-based learning, as well as prior learning experiences, including in institutions and in local, global, and virtual communities and networks. Students should demonstrate proficiencies through inquiry into unscripted questions and problems that are relevant to their interests and aims and where a full understanding of the problem requires insights from multiple areas of study.

EQUITY

General education programs should be equity-minded (see page 9) in design and implementation. This requires a cognitive shift in the ways faculty and administrators understand and address inequalities in outcomes among students of color, students with disabilities, low-income and first-generation students, returning adult students, veterans, and others. General education programs should advance practices and policies that are aimed at achieving the full spectrum of learning outcomes for all students regardless of their backgrounds.

TRANSPARENCY AND ASSESSMENT

Students, faculty members, and other stakeholders should understand what proficiencies are being developed in any general education program, course, or activity, and how these proficiencies can be demonstrated at key milestones in students' progress toward the degree. Students and institutions should be able to point to students' work, especially their "Signature Work" in problem- and project-based inquiry, as demonstrations of proficiency worthy of credit across institutional settings and as a body of work associated with earning the degree.