Introduction

*Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.*


Embracing a twenty-first-century definition of liberal education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in 2005 launched a major national initiative called Liberal Education and America’s Promise, or LEAP. One significant achievement of the LEAP initiative is the development of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, representing contemporary higher education’s expectations for all students’ liberal learning (see fig. 1). In 2007, AAC&U launched the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project in order to develop an approach to assessing student progress in achieving the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes. This effort resulted in the creation of the VALUE rubrics, which effectively translate the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes into sixteen sets of corresponding attributes and levels of achievement. Faculty and other educators now are using the VALUE rubrics to assess a broad range of student work produced in both general education and major programs of study.

The identification of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes represents a “first” in American higher education. For the first time, faculty and other educational professionals from across representative two-year and four-year colleges and universities collaborated to articulate what contemporary higher education institutions commonly expect students to demonstrate as a result of a liberal education. Of even greater national significance is the collaborative nature of the development of the aligned VALUE rubrics and the “mainstreaming” of their criteria and standards of judgment.

To understand the national significance of the VALUE approach to the assessment of students’ liberal learning, it is necessary to frame this development within a broader context. To that end, chapter 1 examines the nexus between the nation’s current and projected economic and social needs, on the one hand, and higher education’s role in graduating more students who have been truly prepared to address those needs, on the other.

Chapter 2 identifies major challenges facing colleges and universities in the twenty-first century. These include challenges related to the broad demographic spread of today’s student bodies and the gaps in student achievement and degree completion across that spread, as well as challenges related to the multiple and often highly individualistic degree pathways students pursue or stitch together based on transfer of credits from multiple degree-offering institutions or other educational providers.
FIGURE 1. The LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

› KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN CULTURES AND THE PHYSICAL AND NATURAL WORLD
  • Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
    *Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring*

› INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL SKILLS, INCLUDING
  • Inquiry and analysis
  • Critical and creative thinking
  • Written and oral communication
  • Quantitative literacy
  • Information literacy
  • Teamwork and problem solving
    *Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance*

› PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, INCLUDING
  • Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
  • Intercultural knowledge and competence
  • Ethical reasoning and action
  • Foundations and skills for lifelong learning
    *Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges*

› INTEGRATIVE AND APPLIED LEARNING, INCLUDING
  • Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
    *Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems*

NOTE: This listing was developed through a multyear dialogue with employers and with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. For more information, see Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2007); *The LEAP Vision for Learning: Outcomes, Practices, Impact, and Employers’ Views* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2011); or visit www.aacu.org/leap.
Within the context of chapters 1 and 2, chapter 3 focuses on AAC&U’s turn-of-the-century call for a recalibration of liberal education curricula and educational practices to educate all students to high levels of achievement. That call was intended to draw attention to the need to close persistent achievement gaps across diverse student populations within higher education. Chapter 4 focuses on the results of two initiatives launched in response to that call: (1) the development of a set of national liberal learning outcomes, the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, and (2) the aligned set of national criteria and standards of judgment to score student work demonstrating those outcomes, the VALUE rubrics.

Through a series of representative case studies, chapters 5 and 6 illustrate how the VALUE approach to assessment has affected campuses by engaging faculty and other educators in broad discussions about how to foster and sustain student learning beyond the individual course and how to engage students in, and hold them responsible for, demonstrating and documenting their liberal learning. The case studies indicate the potential scalability of VALUE—across higher education, beyond individual campuses—as an equitable means of scoring student work and reporting results for both internal and external audiences.

Finally, chapter 7 challenges all colleges, universities, and other educational providers to make the VALUE approach to assessment a nationally visible and shared core commitment. Such a commitment would promote student achievement of the outcomes of a quality liberal education and demonstrate institutional accountability. At the same time, this commitment would preserve the distinctive mission, purposes, core academic values, and educational practices of individual institutions.