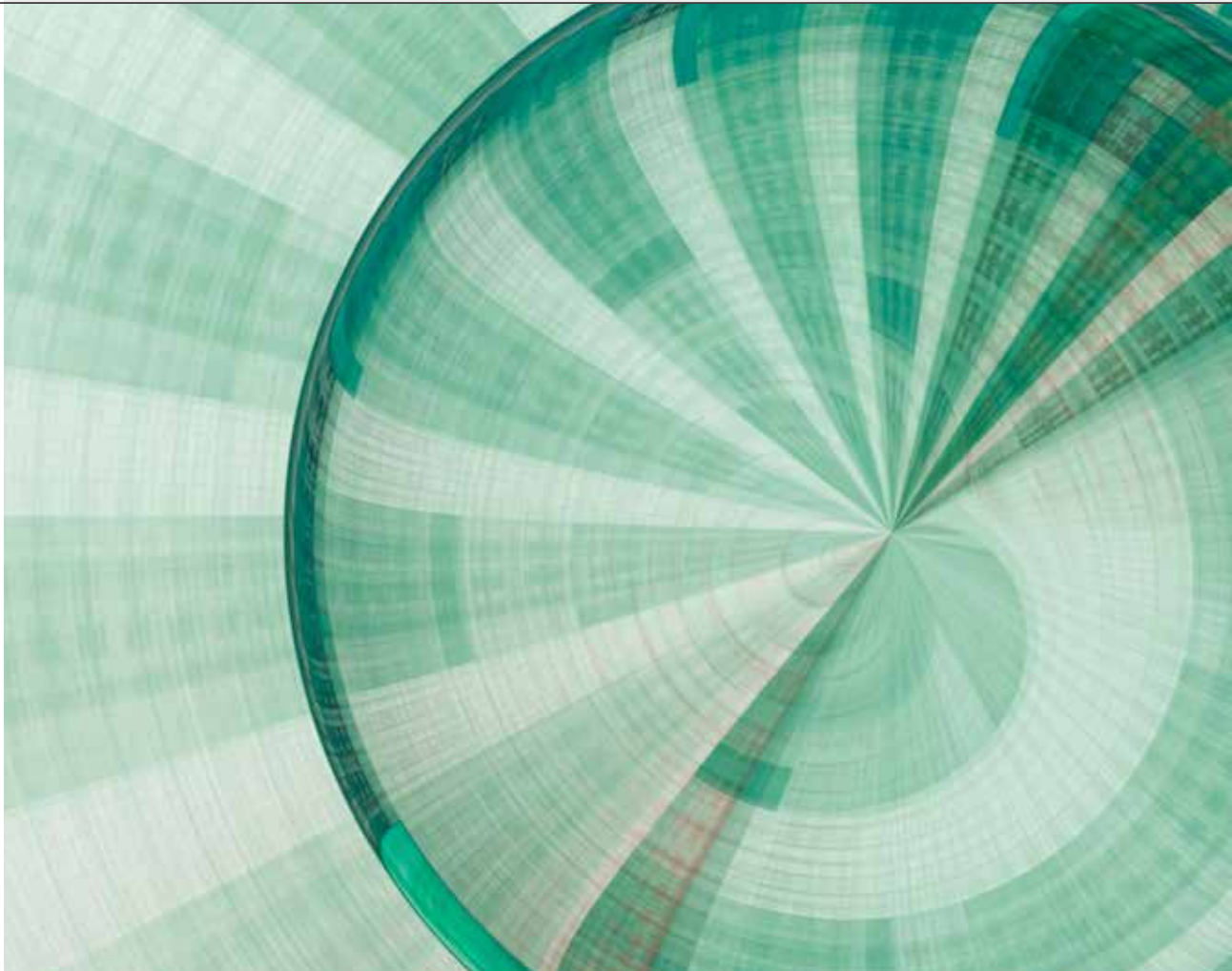


# The Quality of a College Degree

Toward New Frameworks, Evidence, and Interventions



By DEBRA HUMPHREYS, HEATHER McCAMBLY, and JUDITH RAMALEY



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## Foreword

*The Quality of a College Degree* is one of two reports to emerge from a national project focused on student learning and success in the context of student mobility and transfer. In 2011, with grant funding from Lumina Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched Quality Collaboratives: Assessing and Reporting Degree Qualifications Profile Competencies in the Context of Transfer. This three-year project, part of AAC&U's ongoing Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, had two primary goals. First, it sought to build the capacity of educators to use Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) as a shared framework to facilitate successful student transfer and to encourage a greater focus on the quality of student learning, including assessment, rather than on just seat time or credit hour accumulation. Second, it sought to help partnering two-year and four-year institutions strengthen transfer students' achievement of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, a set of twenty-first-century liberal learning outcomes identified through the LEAP initiative that are included in the DQP.

Today, most college students in the United States do not attend a single institution in pursuit of their degrees. Accordingly, the successful attainment of a degree or other credential often depends on a smooth transfer process, as students move between and among higher education providers. This complex pattern of enrollment and participation is often referred to as "student swirl." Since the largest number of students transfer between two-year and four-year institutions, the Quality Collaboratives project was designed to build on successful inter-institutional transfer policies and practices and to explore whether the Degree Qualifications Profile and its focus on student learning proficiencies could be a useful guide for improving the transfer process and reorienting it more directly toward student learning.

Representatives of nine state systems participated in the project, examining state-level policy related to student transfer and piloting new strategies to align curricular pathways and document student achievement within at least one "dyad"—a pair of two-year and four-year institutions that share a significant transfer student population. Over the course of the three project years, participants from ten such dyads explored and tested ways to revise or adapt existing transfer practices in order to acknowledge more fully the importance of demonstrated learning proficiency for determining progress toward degree attainment.

Overall, project participants explored three separate but intersecting aspects of the transfer process: (1) the assessment of learning proficiencies, (2) faculty leadership for advancing and documenting student achievement of shared learning goals, and (3) campus and state policies related to student learning. Through face-to-face national meetings; campus, dyad, and statewide convenings and communication; and the development and testing of resources and tools, participants developed a portfolio of strategies for engaging with the Degree Qualifications Profile and other new frameworks and approaches for documenting the quality of student learning. By intentionally working with campuses and state systems that

## Quality Collaboratives Participating Institutions

### CALIFORNIA

- California State University–Northridge
- Pierce College

### INDIANA

- Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis
- Ivy Tech Community College

### KENTUCKY

- Elizabethtown Community and Technical College
- University of Louisville

### MASSACHUSETTS

- Fitchburg State University
- Middlesex Community College
- Mount Wachusett Community College
- University of Massachusetts Lowell

### NORTH DAKOTA

- Statewide public and private colleges and universities through the North Dakota General Education Council

### OREGON

- The Oregon University System

### UTAH

- Salt Lake Community College
- University of Utah

### VIRGINIA

- Blue Ridge Community College
- J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College
- James Madison University
- Virginia Commonwealth University

### WISCONSIN

- University of Wisconsin–Fox Valley
- University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh
- University of Wisconsin–Parkside
- University of Wisconsin–Waukesha

already were approaching student transfer in new and varied ways (e.g., through statewide mandated transfer frameworks, credit acceptance policies, and disciplinary or general education curriculum mapping efforts), the Quality Collaboratives project was able to identify a wide range of potential benefits of approaching transfer through the lenses of quality learning and demonstrated achievement.

This report and its companion, *Collaboration for Student Transfer: Utilizing the Degree Qualifications Profile for Assessment of Student Proficiency*, along with an online resource hub and forthcoming suite of case studies and campus tools (see [www.aacu.org/qc](http://www.aacu.org/qc)), present the rich findings and insights from this cross-state and cross-campus exploration of student success in the context of transfer.

On behalf of my fellow Quality Collaboratives project leaders, I would like to thank our partner colleagues—and their institutions—who stepped up to the challenge to examine student transfer practices and related assumptions. The resources and work of the project resulted directly from the engagement and risk-taking of faculty and administrators across these twenty community colleges and universities and of leaders at the system and state levels in the nine participating states. The project was a testimony to their efforts and desire to enhance student achievement and successful transfer in higher education. It exemplified the kind of collaborative effort needed to advance a nationwide reform agenda focused on both degree completion and quality learning. The work of the project revealed the benefits of collaborating across institutions, states, and systems to advance student learning and success. Finally, I would like to thank Lumina Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for their generous support of the Quality Collaboratives project.

I invite you to examine the “lessons learned” from the project—lessons about the assessment of student proficiencies, faculty leadership, and policy at the campus, system, and state levels.

— **TERREL L. RHODES**, *Quality Collaboratives Project Leader and AAC&U Vice President for Quality, Curriculum, and Assessment*



## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we thank our partner colleagues at the institutions of higher education that participated in the Quality Collaboratives project. These committed educators stepped up to the challenge of confronting and working to change assumptions and practices related to student transfer, assessment of student learning, and curricula in ways that position students for future success. The resources and work of the project are the direct results of the engagement and risk-taking of faculty and administrators across the twenty participating colleges, community colleges, and universities and leaders at the system and state levels in the nine participating states. The lessons learned from the project are testimony to their efforts and their desire to enhance student achievement and successful transfer. Their work exemplified the kind of collaborative effort needed to advance a nationwide reform agenda focused on both degree completion and the quality of learning. The project revealed the benefits of collaborating across institutions, states, and systems to advance student learning and success.

We are enormously grateful for the generous support for the project provided by Lumina Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. And we thank our colleagues at AAC&U—vice presidents Terrel Rhodes and Susan Albertine, senior fellow Gary Brown, and program manager Rebecca Dolinsky—for their support and collegiality throughout the project.

We extend our sincere plaudits to the editors and designers in AAC&U's Office of Communications, Policy, and Public Engagement. They have worked tirelessly to ensure the editorial integrity and clarity of design for this and the other Quality Collaboratives publications. Finally, we are very grateful to AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider for her guidance and leadership in shepherding this and many other AAC&U projects from conception to funding to completion. The entire higher education community owes her an enormous debt of gratitude.





## CHAPTER 1

# Quality Learning in the Context of “Student Swirl”

In 2011, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched Quality Collaboratives: Assessing and Reporting Degree Qualifications Profile Competencies in the Context of Transfer, a three-year project that was part of a broader ongoing national effort to bring greater clarity to contemporary debates about educational quality. The project took advantage of the release of the first version of Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile (see p. 3),<sup>1</sup> as well as the experience of many two-year and four-year colleges and universities that have used the resources of AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative to advance campus-based reforms related to the quality of undergraduate education.<sup>2</sup> Through the LEAP initiative, AAC&U has taken the lead in highlighting and promoting educational programs and practices, assessment approaches, and institutional policies that contribute to the quality of college education. A part of that larger initiative, the Quality Collaboratives project addressed the need to define, document, and assess student progress toward the achievement of essential learning outcomes in the context of student transfer from two-year to four-year institutions.

It is time now to build on the momentum of current efforts to improve curricular design and learning outcomes assessment, time to reclaim and redirect the national dialogue about what matters in college.

It is time now to build on the momentum of current efforts to improve curricular design and learning outcomes assessment, time to reclaim and redirect the national dialogue about what matters in college. This must be done in ways that honor the distinctive missions of individual institutions and that ensure all students are well served by higher education. The analysis and recommendations presented in this report are intended not as a fixed blueprint, but rather as an emerging and evolving framework. Educators’ work on quality is much more advanced than policy makers, the media, or the general public may recognize, but it is, nonetheless, a “work in progress.”

In shaping Quality Collaboratives, project leaders began with the realization that, too often, *public* discussions of quality and value start in the wrong place—with a desperate search for usable metrics and measures, rather than a big-picture consideration of the purposes of education. In crafting policies and

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1. The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) is a postsecondary learning outcomes framework that specifies what students should be expected to know and be able to do at the associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s levels. The DQP was first introduced in 2011. A second iteration, with alterations based on feedback from college and university campuses and from national associations, was released in 2014. The DQP is available online at <http://degreeprofile.org>.

2. Launched in 2005, Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) is a national public advocacy and campus action initiative designed to champion the importance of a twenty-first-century liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. Through LEAP, hundreds of campuses are making far-reaching educational changes to help students—whatever their chosen fields of study—acquire the broad knowledge, high-order capacities, and real-world experience needed to thrive in the economy and in a globally engaged democracy. LEAP promotes learning outcomes that both educators and employers endorse, engaged or “high-impact” educational practices that foster the learning outcomes, assessments that focus on authentic student work, and inclusive excellence—i.e., proactive efforts to provide all students with equitable access to high-quality educational programs, practices, and accomplishment. For more information about LEAP, visit [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).



quality-assurance frameworks in light of the demands of the twenty-first-century economy and society, it is essential to begin with what students need to learn and, especially, with how well students are able to put knowledge to use as a result of their educational experiences. In other words, we need to be very clear about what we are trying to achieve before we settle on metrics for judging whether we have met our goals.

How does higher learning help students advance their own most important goals? How can higher education best serve the needs of a democratic society and a globally engaged world power? What kinds of learning prepare graduates to contribute to and succeed in the economy of today and tomorrow? What forms of embedded assessment can simultaneously help advance learning goals, deepen students' engagement with their learning, and generate clear evidence about student achievement? Most importantly, who should take the lead on the various aspects involved in defining and generating evidence about the quality of student learning?

These are complex questions. But, using the frameworks developed through the LEAP initiative and the Quality Collaboratives project, campuses and state systems can answer these questions in terms readily understood by educators, students, policy makers, and other stakeholders. The most important policy and educational priorities are to define clearly what a “quality education” is, and then to insist on accountability for ensuring that it is provided equitably to all college students.

Any compelling framework for assessing the quality of learning . . . needs both to be aligned with this definition of quality *and* to address directly the challenge AAC&U has identified as “making excellence inclusive”: ensuring that the best forms of college learning are provided not just to the most privileged students, but to all students seeking higher education degrees.

In the twenty-first century, a quality college education is one that enables students to develop the knowledge, skills, and judgment they need to

- contribute to an innovation-fueled economy;
- participate knowledgeably in their own democracy and in the larger world community in which the United States wields enormous influence;
- pursue their own goals for personal flourishing.

Any compelling framework for assessing the quality of learning or for crafting educational policy in twenty-first-century America needs both to be aligned with this definition of quality *and* to address directly the challenge AAC&U has identified as “making excellence inclusive”: ensuring that the best forms of college learning are provided not just to the most privileged students, but to all students seeking higher education degrees. This requires a willingness to recognize and respond to the reality that, for most of the history of American higher education, educational *excellence* and educational *exclusivity* have been seen as virtually synonymous. We can scarcely hope to provide or report on true educational value if, through a failure to address inequities in preparation and experience, we reserve the most powerful forms of learning for the fortunate few.

Any effort to close equity gaps or to develop policies and practices that are more closely aligned with a twenty-first-century vision of quality also must begin with the most important question: What kinds of learning do graduates

## An overview of the Degree Qualifications Profile

*A template of proficiencies required for the award of college degrees at the associate, bachelor's, and master's levels\**

### Knowledge

At each degree level, every college student should demonstrate proficiency in using both specialized knowledge from at least one field **and** broad, integrative knowledge from arts and sciences fields. **Both kinds of knowledge** should be pursued from first to final year, providing opportunities for **integration across fields and application to complex problems**—in the student's area of emphasis, in out-of-school settings, and in civil society.

#### BROAD AND INTEGRATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Key areas include the sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts, and global, intercultural, and democratic learning.

In **each area**, students

- Learn key concepts and methods of inquiry
- Examine significant debates and questions
- Make evidence-based arguments

In **addition**, at each degree level, students

- Produce work that integrates concepts and methods from at least two fields

#### SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE

Students demonstrate depth of knowledge in a field and produce field-appropriate applications drawing on both the major field and, at the BA level and beyond, other fields. Students learn

- Discipline and field-specific knowledge
- Purposes, methods, and limitations of field
- Applied skills in field
- Integrative skills and methods that draw from multiple fields and disciplines

### Intellectual Skills

Students hone and integrate intellectual skills across the curriculum, applying those skills both to complex challenges within major fields and to broad, integrative problem-solving challenges in general education, and in civic, global, and applied learning. Skills include

- Analytic inquiry
- Use of information resources
- Engaging diverse perspectives
- Ethical reasoning
- Quantitative fluency
- Communication fluency

### Civic and Global Learning

Students acquire knowledge required for responsible citizenship both from their formal studies (see knowledge and skills, above) and from community-based learning, and **demonstrate their ability to integrate both forms of learning in analyzing and addressing significant public problems and questions, both in civic and global contexts**. Civic learning may be demonstrated through research, collaborative projects and/or field-based assignments.

### Applied and Collaborative Learning

Students demonstrate their ability to **integrate and apply** their learning (see knowledge and skills, above) in complex projects and assignments, including collaborative efforts, that may include research, projects, practicums, internships, work assignments, performances, and creative tasks.

\*This chart summarizes Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile, first released in 2014. This edition is informed by feedback from faculty and leaders from hundreds of colleges, universities, and community colleges that worked with the "beta version" of the document, which was published in 2011. The full Degree Qualifications Profile is available for download at [http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/The\\_Degree\\_Qualifications\\_Profile.pdf](http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/The_Degree_Qualifications_Profile.pdf).



need to succeed in a fast-changing economy, to contribute in a democratic and increasingly global society, and to pursue their own dreams? Through the LEAP initiative, AAC&U has documented a broad consensus among educators, employers, and students on the most important outcomes of college (AAC&U 2011; Hart Research Associates 2015). This consensus on learning outcomes can productively inform efforts to change educational policies and practices related to curricular requirements, transfer agreements, and assessment and accountability frameworks.

This report explores how a twenty-first-century vision of quality can help bridge divides among educators, leaders of state systems, and policy makers, as well as how such a broad vision can contribute to efforts at the institutional and system levels to develop new frameworks for ensuring educational quality in the context of transfer and new forms of accountability for what really matters to students and to society.







## CHAPTER 2

# Changing Policy and Practice to Advance a Twenty-First-Century Vision of Quality Learning

The current environment, characterized by an increasingly competitive global economy, certainly presents a compelling mandate for increasing student success in terms of both the numbers of students attaining college degrees and the levels of learning they acquire in earning those degrees. However, the current environment is not always conducive to enacting a “quality learning for all” agenda. Why is this the case? What is the role of state educational policy in this kind of environment?

In *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, Deborah Stone makes a case for seeing policy making as a “struggle over ideas” (2011, 15). Those ideas shape the fundamental process by which a policy emerges. Similarly, Robert Rich (2007) sees policy making as a form of public learning and public problem solving. Both ways of thinking about policy contrast sharply with how policy making is usually described. Policy analysts generally operate from a market economy model that assumes discrete individuals, each pursuing his or her own self-interest in a rational manner and seeking to maximize individual gain. By contrast, both Stone and Rich approach policy making as a more complex process. They articulate how change occurs within communities where “individuals live in a dense web of relationships, dependencies and loyalties; where they care deeply about at least some other people besides themselves; where they influence each other’s desires and goals; and where they envision and act in support of the public interest as well as their individual interests” (Stone 2011, 10–11). These two models lead to different ways of thinking about how to achieve societal or educational goals through policy change.

Policy makers’ expectations, approaches, and assumptions differ in important and even decisive ways, depending on whether they regard the policy environment as a marketplace or an interdependent community. They may have a clear goal (e.g., a well-educated citizenry or a more efficient educational pipeline feeding specific professions where talent is needed). They may have different ways of defining the problem to be solved (e.g., too few citizens with degrees or credentials, or too few citizens with the broad capacities required in a globally connected democracy). They may disagree about the cause of the problem or how to solve it (e.g., by funding colleges in ways that incentivize increased degree-completion rates, legislating common course numbering for general education requirements, or creating block transfer models and streamlining curricular articulation across institutions). Moreover, policy makers may develop various solutions and corresponding ways to determine whether their efforts are working.

In the world of policy making today, in fact, both models—the marketplace model and the community-oriented model—are needed to articulate problems and solutions that can guide the shaping of a supportive policy environment that addresses the educational needs of society. For example, prospective students

The current environment, characterized by an increasingly competitive global economy . . . presents a compelling mandate for increasing student success in terms of both the numbers of students attaining college degrees and the levels of learning they acquire.



would certainly benefit from more information about the institutions of higher education they may wish to attend (a potential outcome of policy derived from the application of an informed marketplace model). They also, however, would benefit from well-designed educational pathways with clearly articulated learning goals calibrated to the needs of life in today's world, and from effective approaches to the documentation and assessment of learning (a potential outcome of policy derived from the application of a community-minded model). In measuring the impact of postsecondary education and seeking to ensure its quality, it is essential to attend to a variety of concerns. By necessity, this requires both quantitative and qualitative evidence as well as a complex and varied array of actors working on different aspects of institutional change at different levels—department, program, school, system, accreditation region, state.

In this report, we call for a new approach to defining and assessing the quality of student learning and for renewed attention to the ways institutional and state-level policy can support a twenty-first-century vision of what it means to be well educated. If such a vision were to be taken seriously, how would policy making change? This report and its recommendations are shaped by an awareness that the context in which policies are created and implemented matters significantly, and that the adoption of new policies will not in itself result in needed change. New policies must be accompanied by new approaches to institutional governance and practice, and these must be deployed throughout higher education institutions and systems.

### Changing Expectations of College Graduates

The environment for change in higher education is influenced in part by assumptions and ideas about what prompts individuals and institutions to change and about how to support those changes, and in part by pressures from the broader society. Public attitudes about the role and importance of higher education continue to change across all states in response to social and economic developments related, for example, to shifting demographic patterns, the adoption of new economic approaches, the changing role of the United States in the world, and the need for resilience and adaptation in response to global climate change.

It is very clear from public opinion research that the general public understands the increasing importance of college as a pathway to the middle class. In a recent survey by Gallup, for example, 70 percent of Americans said it was “very important” to have a certificate or degree beyond high school; 82 percent agreed that “in the future it will be more important than it is now to have a post-secondary degree, certificate, or credential to get a good job” (2014, 7). However, the public is increasingly skeptical about whether pursuing a college degree is actually worth the cost. Many are losing faith in higher education's commitment to quality. A 2009 survey found that 60 percent of Americans agree that “colleges today are like most businesses and care more about the bottom line” than about “education and making sure students have a good educational experience.” This represents an increase of 8 percentage points since 2007—a significant jump in such a short period of time

New policies must be accompanied by new approaches to institutional governance and practice, and these must be deployed throughout higher education institutions and systems.



(Immerwahr and Johnson 2010, 2). These public opinion trends reflect the changing environment for higher education institutions, and they influence how policy makers view those institutions.

Changes in the demand for higher education and in public attitudes toward higher education institutions have been accompanied by the emergence of complex social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges that are taking the form of “wicked problems” throughout society (Camillus 2008). Responding successfully to these complex problems will require teamwork and collaboration as well as the integration of ideas and strategies from many different perspectives. One fundamental part of the consensus vision of quality endorsed by employers and educators is the need for graduates who are innovative, adaptive problem solvers. The general public, however, may not be fully aware of this emerging critical need. Such new expectations of college graduates demand movement in educational policy and practice—away from a primary focus on the mastery of content in the curriculum by isolated individuals, and toward a new emphasis on learning in the context of increasingly complex “real-world” group problem solving.

## Where Employers and Educators Agree

Through its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has highlighted this consensus and shift in focus by, first, paying attention to higher education institutions’ own espoused and changing goals for learning and, then, analyzing the implications of societal and economic changes for what students need from higher education. Through a series of focus groups and national surveys, AAC&U has demonstrated that employers and educators are largely “on the same page” in defining what outcomes and practices are essential to a quality higher education experience. Tables 1 and 2 document the strong agreement between educators and employers about the kinds of learning students need from a college education, regardless of their intended careers. Table 1 summarizes findings from a 2009 survey of AAC&U member institutions. The association’s membership of more than 1,300 institutions—divided roughly evenly between public and private institutions—spans all parts of postsecondary education: community colleges, liberal arts colleges, master’s institutions, research universities, and special-mission institutions. Nearly half of all AAC&U member institutions responded to the survey.

Eighty percent of respondents to the 2009 survey reported having set learning goals for all students, typically in the context of accreditation reviews—an example of significant policy influence. Changes in accreditation policy have had an important and often unrecognized impact on the clarity of institutional goals for student learning, making it possible to document the nearly universal agreement that all students need

- broad learning about science, society, culture, histories, and the arts;
- intellectual and practical skills basic to evidence-based analysis, reasoning, and communication;
- civic, ethical, and intercultural knowledge and competencies—or what AAC&U terms “responsibilities”;
- integrative and applied learning experiences.

As most educators will recognize, these outcomes build from the root traditions of liberal or liberal arts education, which has always sought to foster broad learning, reasoning, and other “powers of the mind,” as well as civic and ethical formation. But where most earlier iterations of liberal education celebrated “learning for its own sake,” this twenty-first-century framework places strong emphasis on students’ ability to put their knowledge to productive use, whether in their personal lives, in the economy, or in democratic and global communities. The focus on applied learning has profound implications for educational practices, curricular designs, assessment models, and curricular and transfer policies at both the campus and system levels.

**TABLE 1. AAC&U member institutions’ learning outcomes for all students**

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World	
• Humanities	92%
• Sciences	91%
• Social Sciences	90%
• Global/World Cultures	87%
• Mathematics	87%
• Diversity in the United States	73%
• United States History	49%
• Languages Other than English	42%
• Sustainability	24%
Intellectual and Practical Skills	
• Writing Skills	99%
• Critical Thinking	95%
• Quantitative Reasoning	91%
• Oral Communication	88%
• Intercultural Skills	79%*
• Information Literacy	76%
• Research Skills	65%
Personal and Social Responsibility	
• Intercultural Skills	79%*
• Ethical Reasoning	75%
• Civic Engagement	68%
Integrative Learning	
• Application of Learning	66%
• Integration of Learning	63%

**NOTE:** Each of the percentages listed in the table represents the proportion of institutions that have common learning goals for which the corresponding outcome is included in those goals. These data were generated as part of AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, and the four categories of learning outcomes correspond to the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes.

\* These items are shown in two learning outcome categories because they apply to both.

**SOURCE:** Data from Hart Research Associates (2009).



As table 2 makes clear, employers largely agree with educators about the kinds of learning that college should foster in all students. They heartily endorse a rich mix of broad knowledge and strong problem-solving capacities and experiences. Table 2 summarizes findings from a recent survey of employers commissioned by AAC&U and presented in the report *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (Hart Research Associates 2015). Read in its entirety, this report shows that employers prize and recommend

- a combination of broad and specialized learning;
- the same intellectual skills educators endorse;
- a strong emphasis on ethical reasoning, and on applied and intercultural learning.

**TABLE 2. Employer priorities for most important college learning outcomes**

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World	
• Broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences	78%*
• Knowledge and understanding of democratic institutions and values	87%*
• Intercultural skills and understanding of societies and cultures outside the US	78%*
Intellectual and Practical Skills	
• Oral communication	85%†
• Teamwork skills in diverse groups	83%†
• Written communication	82%†
• Critical thinking and analytic reasoning	81%†
• Complex problem solving	70%†
• Information literacy	68%†
• Innovation and creativity	65%†
• Technological skills	60%†
• Quantitative reasoning	56%†
Personal and Social Responsibility	
• Problem solving in diverse settings	96%*
• Civic knowledge, skills, and judgment essential for contributing to the community and to our democratic society	86%*
• Ethical judgment and decision making	81%†
Integrative and Applied Learning	
• Applied knowledge in real-world settings	80%†

\* The percentage of employers who “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that, “regardless of a student’s chosen field of study,” every student should attain knowledge or skill in this area.

† The percentage of employers who rate this outcome as very important (eight to ten on a ten-point scale) for recent graduates entering the job market.

**SOURCE:** Data from Hart Research Associates (2015).



Overwhelmingly, employers agree that a student's development of strong intellectual skills is more important for long-term career success than the content knowledge gained through study in a particular major. In response to this survey, employers reported that when they are down to the final judgment about competing job candidates, they favor those with notable strengths in diversity, ethics and integrity, and applied learning skills.

As measured by multiple national surveys conducted between 2006 and 2015, this set of consensus outcomes and employer priorities has informed AAC&U's family of campus-based change initiatives, including both LEAP and Greater Expectations: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College, and it has also shaped Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (see p. 3), which was at the heart of the Quality Collaboratives project. Actually enacting this shared vision of learning will require a clear sense of broad trends in higher education and advocacy work aimed at helping the general public fully appreciate the changing environment and how colleges and universities are responding to societal needs.

### Changing Patterns of Participation

Other contemporary trends will also affect efforts to incorporate a workable twenty-first-century vision of quality into federal and state policies that address the funding of higher education and that define public expectations for productivity and outcomes. Patterns of participation in postsecondary education are increasingly complex. Today, a student may study at several institutions, either simultaneously or sequentially, and encounter a mix of experiences, ranging from familiar classroom settings and blended or hybrid courses to entirely online programs and more experiential, competency-based programs.

It is rare in today's educational environment for any one institution to be able to shape and guide the pathways students take as they pursue their educational goals. The college experience is no longer built on assumptions about individual institutions as the sole repositories of knowledge or expertise or as the exclusive sources of educational identity and purpose. At the same time, as a college education has become essential, demographic shifts have generated a much more diverse group of participants—in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic background—who wish and deserve to pursue postsecondary education. Colleges and universities have not yet aligned their curricula and their transfer policies and practices in order to serve this diverse student body and to achieve equitable outcomes, as evidenced by the experiences of those students who, at the beginning of their postsecondary educations, are placed in developmental education sequences. A high proportion of these students, many of them from families that are unfamiliar with the college experience, fail to progress to credit-bearing college-level work or fail to earn degrees (Witham et al. 2015). Our nation cannot afford to lose the talent of these students.

Moreover, as new policies are enacted to ensure that all students progress to degrees, it is equally important to ensure that these students are truly prepared to

Overwhelmingly, employers agree that a student's development of strong intellectual skills is more important for long-term career success than the content knowledge gained through study in a particular major.



function in today's innovation-driven economy and in increasingly diverse communities across the nation.

## New Institutional Priorities

As these demographic and societal changes unfold, the academic communities within colleges and universities are changing also. Collaboration across the disciplines is increasing. Many institutions are identifying a small set of themes to guide both scholarship and the development of signature curricular programs. Institutions are becoming known for regional engagement and for focusing on problems that are especially challenging for their local communities. These connections to the broader society are changing how colleges and universities define and enact their missions and, as a result, they also are changing the educational environment and the resources available to students.

As evidenced by participants in the Quality Collaboratives project, these developments have created a greater sense of shared responsibilities and led to a shift in attitude on the part of educators—a shift from *my* work to *our* work, from *my* course to *our* curriculum. College guides and ranking systems are beginning to recognize such new factors as the composition of the student body, commitment to engagement with local communities, and commitment to environmental sustainability as valuable indicators of the presence of a culture and environment of collaboration.

As new policies are enacted to ensure that all students progress to degrees, it is equally important to ensure that these students are truly prepared to function in today's innovation-driven economy and in increasingly diverse communities across the nation.

## Educational Pathways Among Institutions

The boundaries that define institutions are becoming more porous, and more attention is being paid to the pathways between and among institutions to ensure that these pathways are clear and easy to navigate. Accordingly, the Quality Collaboratives project opted to focus on transfer and articulation as a context in which to explore the meaning of a quality education and to experiment with the use of the Degree Qualifications Profile as a tool to help campuses focus on working relationships and learning outcomes. Project participants also used the Degree Qualifications Profile to inform their thinking about student work and how, together, they can promote and document student achievement in ways that align with a twenty-first-century vision of quality. The Quality Collaboratives project explored the potential for the transformation of curricular development and transfer practice in ways that would provide an improved system of transfer, not only allowing students to “travel” between institutions without adding “time to degree,” but also ensuring that they achieve the twenty-first-century learning outcomes they need most.

The transfer “problem”—as represented in particular by the issues of “time to degree” and excess credit accumulation—is being addressed by many state systems and legislatures through a variety of policy solutions, including system-wide articulation agreements, common frameworks for core general education curricula, common course numbering initiatives, pathways programs that organize general education requirements around integrative themes, transfer



student “bills of rights,” and state- or system-wide web-based transfer tools that help students map the shortest routes to graduation. Although such solutions may not address all concerns about equitable student achievement of core learning outcomes, they do represent familiar and accessible policy tools. Familiarity, however, does not equate to efficiency or ease of implementation, as evidenced by a recent “peek under the covers of [an] articulation system” in North Carolina, which revealed the incredible complexity and labor-intensive nature of implementing such solutions (Johnstone 2014).

The current environment is ripe for a more transformative approach to the transfer problem, one that reexamines the core principles and goals of any transfer system . . . and that fundamentally realigns policy to support these ends.

Given the current rate and range of “student swirl,” adaptive or incremental approaches may lead only to partial solutions, at best. The current environment is ripe for a more transformative approach to the transfer problem, one that reexamines the core principles and goals of any transfer system—i.e., to guide students seamlessly through changing educational pathways, while maintaining the quality essential to postgraduate success—and that fundamentally realigns policy to support these ends. Such a change would likely require policy leaders to divert policy-making and implementation energies and resources, from solutions that change the status quo incrementally to solutions that transform foundational practices and policies in ways that recognize the reality of today’s students and today’s institutional contexts.

## Creating Effective Expectations and Policies for a Changing Educational System

Throughout the Quality Collaboratives project, nearly all the participating state educational leaders were experiencing new and challenging policy environments in their states, environments marked by severe budget cutbacks, shifting accountability frameworks, changing governance structures, and new legislative mandates to streamline transfer through various system-wide remedies. As they observed and reported on the progress made through the several campus-based Quality Collaboratives efforts, these state leaders developed creative and constructive approaches to introducing the critical importance of quality and student learning outcomes to new audiences and within new policy contexts.

The interest in promoting a new collaborative model across participating states exemplifies the possibilities for bringing together market-driven and community-minded approaches to policy and practice. A market-driven approach tends to involve posing questions about the private benefit of a college education—as measured, for example, by employment, earnings, and the personal cost (expressed in both dollars and time) of seeking a degree—and, therefore, may end up focusing on policies related to efficiency. By contrast, a community-minded approach tends to involve posing questions about how attitudes, beliefs, and values are changing; how graduates will use their education; and what kinds of challenges students may encounter, both while in college and after graduation.

Both ways of looking at the role and purpose of an education are valuable. However, in today’s policy climate, the marketplace/efficiency model is more influential. Federal and state education policy is focused on increasing completion



rates, reducing time to degree, improving ease of transfer, and forestalling any loss of credits. Of course, faculty members care about whether students successfully and efficiently complete degree programs; however, they tend also to focus on clarifying educational outcomes, developing more meaningful ways to document and assess learning, testing new pedagogies aligned with those outcomes, and working with student affairs partners to support student achievement and success.

The Quality Collaboratives project, which involved educators in two-year and four-year partner institutions that were using the Degree Qualifications Profile to inform the development of new ways to document and assess student achievement, was predicated on the community-minded approach to change described above. Nonetheless, the expectations of policy makers who take a market-driven approach can productively be connected to this alternative way of generating evidence of quality.





## CHAPTER 3

# Making Student Learning a Priority in the Context of Completion Goals

As the college completion agenda continues to dominate policy discussions, we have arrived at a moment of potential convergence: efficiency, improved completion rates, and higher levels of student achievement do not have to be mutually exclusive goals. All three of these goals are important to the future of postsecondary institutions, and one goal should not be sacrificed for another. The scope of current policy tools, however, may not be adequate for this convergent moment. While educational quality is widely recognized as being important, it is often considered too amorphous for inclusion in large-scale policy conversations, including conversations about transfer and student mobility. Most policy makers choose to focus on ways to apply pressure in the areas of access or efficiency and hope that quality will follow in its wake. With the right framework for introducing greater transparency and better evidence about quality and equity into the policy-making dialogue, it may be possible to surmount this barrier to more integrated and aligned policy making.

Efficiency, improved completion rates, and higher levels of student achievement do not have to be mutually exclusive goals.

## More Completion, Higher Quality: The Challenge for Institutional and State Leadership

As the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) designed and launched the Quality Collaboratives project, it became very clear that policy makers and academic leaders, especially those governing large public state systems of higher education, were mobilizing to leverage whatever means they had to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of educational systems. They were seeking changes in policy and practice in a climate of increased public skepticism about quality, decreasing financial support for higher education through public taxation, and economic pressures to ramp up the talent pipeline in order to fuel economic recovery. In this climate, what began as a “completion agenda” to increase the educational level of a state’s citizenry morphed into a “more-completion-at-less-cost agenda. . . . [The state policy agenda] became too narrowly focused; whereas society and the economy need[ed] ‘more and *better*,’ policy leaders [were] trying to deliver ‘more and *cheaper*’” (Humphreys 2012, 10).

The experience of faculty teams working across institutional and departmental divides in the Quality Collaboratives project provides lessons in how to begin to address the misalignment between policy and practice. The project challenged an assumption that is all too common in policy circles, namely, that individual faculty members can or should be able to produce quality outcomes regardless of the policy environment in which they operate, and regardless of patterns of student mobility or prior learning. While it may have been true in an earlier era that policy making was “distant” from the faculty-led teaching and learning process, that is no longer the case today. For example, at least five of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ top ten state policy issues speak to directives,

## Performance or Incentive Funding in Quality Collaboratives States

All nine of the state participants in the Quality Collaboratives (QC) project have adopted or are planning to adopt some type of performance-based funding, incentive, or accountability model. The models range widely in scope and complexity. For example, in 2014, Utah awarded \$1 million based on performance metrics (NCSL 2015); Massachusetts awards 50 percent of its over \$200 million in annual community college funding based on performance metrics, plus an additional \$7.5 million in performance incentive grants to two-year and four-year institutions in order to further the goals of the statewide Vision Project (Saloman-Fernandez 2014). In terms of complexity, while Oregon allocates performance funds based on just two metrics—total degrees awarded, and degrees awarded to underrepresented or rural students—other states rely on allocation schemes that involve six or more metrics and various weighting mechanisms (NCSL 2015).

Many of the QC states have created models that take into account progress metrics (transfer rates, thirty-credit mark, and developmental education completion), workforce demands (weighting STEM or other high-need fields), and equity-oriented metrics (weighting minority or low-income student degree completion or changes in equity gaps). The implications of these performance models for educational outcomes are still unknown. However, if performance and incentive funding mechanisms are intended to support strategic investment in critical societal and community outcomes, then how could it be said that student learning needs or learning equity gaps are receiving necessary investment in the absence of evidence for these outcomes that is comparable to the evidence required for completion, retention, and workforce outputs?

priorities, and funding mechanisms that directly affect the environment for teaching and learning. These include emphases on attainment and completion goals, performance funding, pressures related to vocational education, and leveraging of postsecondary systems to fulfill regional economic demands (AASCU State Relations and Policy Analysis Team 2014, 10).

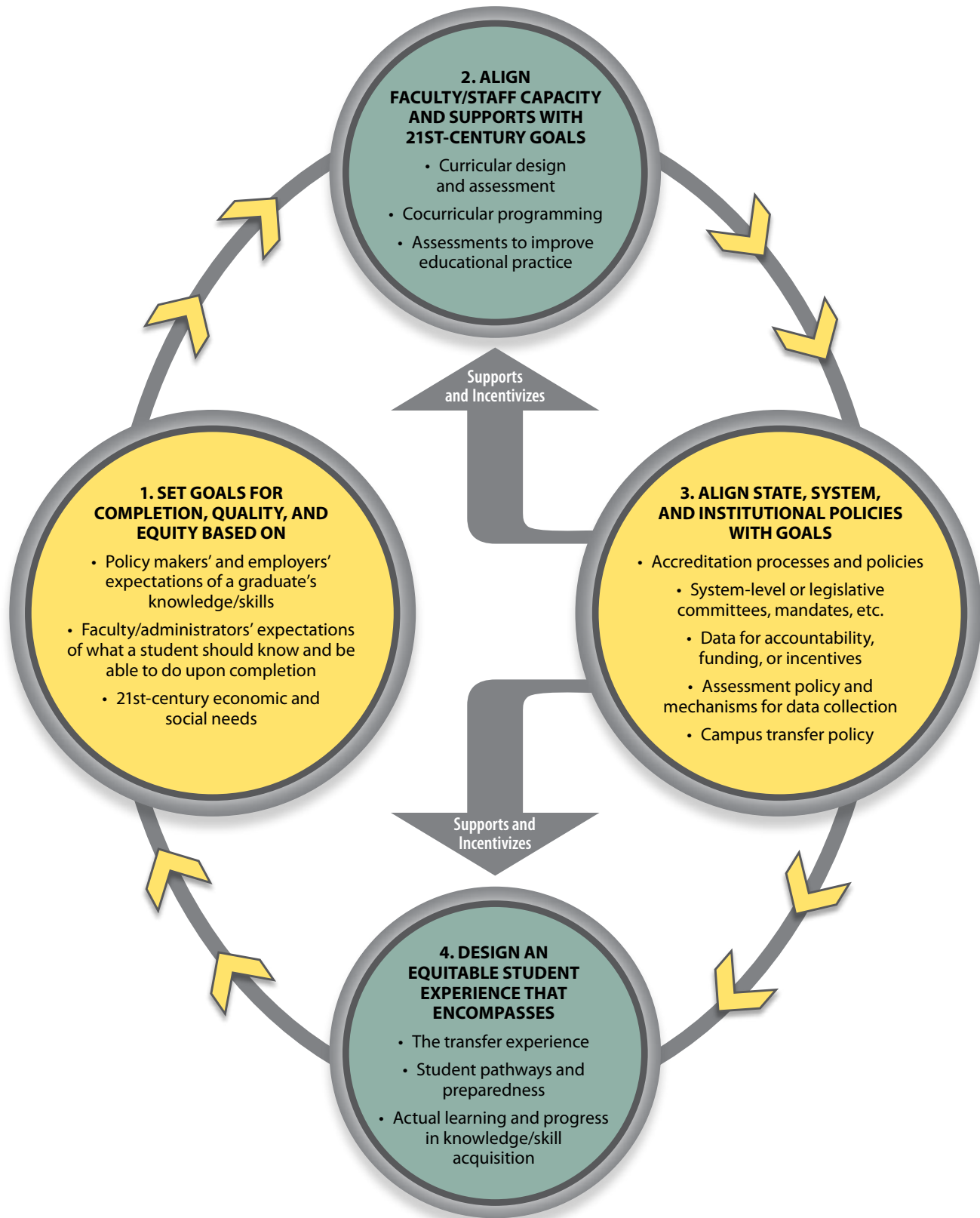
In this context, how can educators and educational leaders pull different but complementary levers to increase efficiency and productivity (e.g., by improving transfer rates), while also taking responsibility for improvements in learning all along the pathways that lead to the completion of a postsecondary degree? One of the greatest and most insidious challenges facing these leaders today is the unproductive tension created by the misalignment among critical elements of the educational “ecosystem.” Figure 1 illustrates a number of the key components that could be more productively aligned to support the goal of increasing student achievement levels—and, thereby, advance individual social mobility, economic viability, and citizen engagement. Developing such a system requires an understanding of how the different elements in an educational environment and the forces that shape that environment must align in order to yield the desired policy and student outcomes.

Examples abound of misalignment between student needs and assumed learning outcomes, on the one hand, and the larger structures and metrics underlying reform, funding, and systemic change, on the other. In the Quality Collaboratives project, more than one state team found itself struggling to identify leverage points for learning-based initiatives within existing policy or funding mechanisms. These project leaders needed to direct attention to student learning in response to policy makers’ and employers’ expectations related to the skills and knowledge of college graduates, but they struggled to find support for these efforts in an environment defined largely by completion, efficiency, or major (e.g., STEM-only) measures and mandates for institutional accountability and funding.

Project leaders experienced similar tensions in transfer-specific policy. In one example, a Quality Collaboratives team found that although transfer partners wanted to create an aligned learning pathway leading from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, the system-wide policy strictly defined this work in terms of technical alignment of syllabi or textbook use. This limited definition did not have the effect of building trust among faculty, and it did little to foster the collaborative engagement necessary to build such a pathway. Improved alignment in these areas could better support improvements in institutional structures, faculty development and collaboration, and student experiences



FIGURE 1. Aligning Policy and Practice for Completion and Quality Learning Outcomes





that produce the desired outcomes in terms of both learning and progress to degree completion. As figure 1 illustrates, the efficiency of a system depends on its capacity to use policy and resources to support the practices that produce the most important outcomes.

## The Quality and Completion Challenge

Figure 1 illustrates the need to align the work of measuring, supporting, and producing student learning, on the one hand, and the work of measuring, supporting, and producing college credentials, on the other—with the production of *equitable* outcomes being central to both paradigms. The system is misaligned, but these are not mutually exclusive goals. In fact, in an aligned system, these two standards—learning and completion—would be indistinguishable. Degree completion would be a proxy for student learning aligned to societal and employer needs.

The misalignment represented by the tension between societal goals for higher education and the singular reliance on completion-based levers has become a common feature of higher education policy in the United States. To incentivize completion, policy makers request data reflecting outputs (graduation rates) rather than learning outcomes (student achievement). Bringing these critical pieces into alignment will not be possible without better and disaggregated data on student achievement—i.e., better information about student achievement, disaggregated by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, or race and ethnicity in order to reveal patterns, such as differences in success rates or progress toward degree. These data can be used to guide educators’ and policy makers’ decisions about investment in the student experience and faculty development. The dearth of adequate data related to student learning and achievement was evidenced throughout the Quality Collaboratives project, as teams struggled to build from the ground up a foundation for collecting these data.

To incentivize completion, policy makers request data reflecting outputs (graduation rates) rather than learning outcomes (student achievement).

Completion measures are effective as a basis for informing and guiding higher education policy only if they authentically signify the types of student learning that fulfill underlying societal goals—for example, individual social mobility, economic/workforce productivity, and increased democratic engagement (Wolniak, Mayhew, and Engberg 2012; Campbell and Cabrera 2014). The few studies that test the relationship between meaningful student learning and completion metrics indicate that college completion rates are not necessarily indicative of deep learning (Campbell and Cabrera 2014; Hu, McCormick, and Gonyea 2012). As a result, with respect to the quality of learning, the utility of applying pressure to completion levers as a means of ensuring equity or greater social mobility is questionable.

Leaders in the Quality Collaboratives project were very sensitive to the potential negative consequences of the current policy focus on completion and productivity. Lack of attention to quality could open the door to policies that would direct resources and pressure away from practices and programs that create the desired student and institutional outcomes. For example, lowering expectations for student achievement; deemphasizing proven, albeit time-intensive, practices that promote deep learning; and decreasing access in order to



improve completion rates—all of these could “move the needle” on graduation rates or institutional cost-cutting. Such an improvement clearly would not result in improved student learning, however; accordingly, it is likely that public confidence in the value of a college degree would continue to diminish. It is also likely that historical inequities will continue to be reproduced if low-income students and students of color receive credentials without the deep learning necessary to succeed and excel equitably in terms of individual social mobility, well-being, and civic engagement.

Absent a policy dialogue that is informed by meaningful evidence of learning, higher education leaders will continue to find themselves at the mercy of critics who challenge the value of a college education. Worse still, without such evidence, leaders and educators alike will remain unable to assess, understand, and transform educational practice and institutional investment in a systematic way. It is necessary, then, to begin collecting meaningful evidence of student achievement, to shine a light on this evidence throughout colleges and universities, and to align policy, investment, and accountability systems in such a way as to improve these outcomes.

Absent a policy dialogue that is informed by meaningful evidence of learning, higher education leaders will continue to find themselves at the mercy of critics who challenge the value of a college education.

## **Toward Alternative Models for Quality, Completion, and Equity**

Current outcomes-focused approaches to policy making apply a basic idea about organizational change: that resources tied to particular metrics will force higher education institutions, often perceived as slow and resistant to change, into more rapid transformation. The paradigm for continued existence hinges on reacting to policy pressures intended to contain costs and demonstrate efficiencies (Zumeta and Kinne 2001). Many higher education leaders, including those who participated in the Quality Collaboratives project, have cautioned policy makers against applying these levers in a way that is misaligned with higher education’s core educational mission (specifically as it relates to serving undergraduate students) and, thereby, to avoid creating incentives for administrators or educators to act on skewed priorities. Any framework for future accountability, incentivization, or funding should address critical questions about how evidence is generated and used to transform institutional and individual actions and planning for the purposes of achieving authentic learning, equity, and workforce-development outcomes.

In addition to concerns about its potential to diminish the quality of the degree by focusing on the wrong metrics, misalignment in accountability systems raises serious concerns about equity. Many fear that performance-based accountability or funding models have the potential to further disadvantage either students from traditionally underserved groups or underfunded institutions, and to create perverse incentives that encourage institutions to diminish services or access to so-called “high-risk” students (Harnisch 2013; Hillman, Kelchen, and Goldrick-Rab 2013). Recent evidence confirms that performance-based initiatives can indeed negatively affect critical goals such as equitable access to postsecondary opportunity and can encourage the creation of credentials with lower



labor-market value (Hillman, Tandberg, and Fryar 2015). In light of these concerns, are there alternative approaches to defining efficiency and conceiving of policy and accountability models that better align the inputs, processes, and outcomes most critical to the success of higher education institutions?

Over the years, alternative models have emerged that take greater account of both equity and student learning than do models that focus on completion rates alone. Two such alternatives stand out as a backdrop for the framework presented below: the learning-centered productivity model discussed by Johnstone (1993), and the equity-inclusive model discussed by Dowd (2003) and by Dowd and Shieh (2013).

In the 1990s, describing a policy environment very similar to today's in terms of state disinvestment and diminished public opinion of the value of college degrees, Johnstone presented his "learning productivity" model for higher education, emphasizing that "significant and sustainable productive advances in higher education must be achieved through greater attention to the learner" (1993, 2). "Learning productivity" relates the input of faculty and staff not to enrollments, courses taught, or either credit or classroom hours assigned, but to learning or demonstrated mastery instead. By switching the focus of productivity to learning rather than either faculty or staff time or credit hours, such a model creates new potential for reducing systemic waste. Unfortunately, Johnstone did not dig into questions related to the stratification of students' precollegiate experiences and educational needs; he focused instead on such concerns as "wasted" summer vacations and aimless curricular drifting. Not unlike certain models emerging today, Johnstone's model is based on the assumption that students can and should be able to learn independently and to test out of courses based on mastery.

Johnstone's "learning productivity" model gives too little attention to equity. Yet, his observation that "the principle productivity problem in higher education in America may lie neither in some presumed insufficiency of effort on the part of faculty, nor in some presumed 'bloat' of non-teaching staff, but rather in sub-optimal learning and less than fully engaged learners" (1993, 3), resonates with the issues that concerned the Quality Collaboratives project. Because existing transfer and pathway policies fixate on credits and course numbers, rather than on the quality and evidence of learning, students and faculty tend to follow suit. Project participants found that policy influences experience and that they were engaging their students not with a well-conceived learning pathway, but rather with a bureaucratic one. The same held true for faculty who initially struggled to engage with the concept of defining their work using learning outcomes rather than courses or credit. In the Quality Collaboratives project, when the emphasis of policy and data collection shifted to learning, the focus of the measures for transfer and productivity shifted accordingly, from checking off a list of required courses to tracing learning along a pathway.

Dowd discusses at length the danger of emphasizing the ideology of efficiency—doing more with less—over "economic efficiency." She uses this discussion to describe the process of decreasing a system's waste while maintaining and boosting its ability to fulfill higher education's critical role in

Because existing transfer and pathway policies fixate on credits and course numbers, rather than on the quality and evidence of learning, students and faculty tend to follow suit.



promoting the public good by “reducing social and economic inequality and strengthening democratic processes” (2003, 110). In other words, if a system reinforces the stratification of higher education by lowering quality for some students and not others, it is not fulfilling its intended societal role and, thus, it is not economically efficient. Equity goals can be pursued with technical efficiency in mind. But the ultimate goal of equity must be central to any evidence or metrics used to monitor progress because “what gets counted, counts” (Dowd and Shieh 2013, 50). To that end, institutions and systems must produce disaggregated evidence of student achievement to ensure that, on average, different racial and socioeconomic groups are achieving outcomes equitably. Dowd refers to this as “equity inclusive performance accountability” (Dowd 2003, 113).

While most educational leaders value both learning and equity, accountability and funding mechanisms rarely provide the deep and transformative support necessary to produce those outcomes, particularly in the most underfunded institutions—community colleges and open-access colleges and universities. The use of evidence as a means of understanding student learning and the impact of curricula and professional practice on student outcomes is critical to transforming a stratified system. To produce meaningful change, it is essential to invest in, or hold institutions accountable for, outcome equity, which, in turn, requires measuring the outcomes that are most valued (Dowd and Shieh 2013). Although the use of evidence to influence funding or accountability can have negative repercussions, an equity- and learning-inclusive model could be reframed to result in funding or support strategies that involve selecting the most “appropriate resource level and . . . [determine] who deserves additional resources” in order to close equity gaps (Dowd and Shieh 2013, 44).

While these alternatives lay the groundwork for new equity-minded policy frameworks, they do not yet provide a model for using disaggregated evidence of learning outcomes for the purpose of institutional change and policy making. Moreover, little attention is paid in these models to issues of equity specifically within transfer policy, despite the disproportionate impact the current transfer system has on students of color and low-income students (Chase et al. 2012, 700). Dowd suggests that, at their worst, such policies can increase educational stratification, creating an environment in which access to valuable credentials becomes scarce, “while the value of degrees available to the masses falls” (2003, 96). Many educators and educational leaders fear such outcomes, which raise distrust across sectors. This only underscores the importance of creating policies that directly address concerns about quality, equity, and completion, as well as policies that support cross-institutional interactions that build trust between and among two-year and four-year institutions.

While most educational leaders value both learning and equity, accountability and funding mechanisms rarely provide the deep and transformative support necessary to produce those outcomes.

## Policy Alignment and the General Education Pathway

In a period of profound societal and educational flux, policy change can be particularly complex and challenging. In an environment in which debates about how to account for the performance and productivity of colleges and universities continue



to unfold, the Quality Collaboratives project focused on experimentation and on using the strategies described below to better align policies and practices related to general education, that part of the educational pathway that is traversed by the entire undergraduate student population.

The general education curriculum is shared by all students, but, as was widely recognized by participants in the Quality Collaboratives project, it often serves not as a pathway to essential skill development or to vital knowledge acquisition and applied problem solving, but instead as a thicket of bureaucratic hurdles that prevent students from both reaching appropriate learning outcome levels and successfully transferring into degree programs. In the project, participants approached this problem primarily by examining internal policies and carefully assigning responsibilities for the interpretation and implementation of policy directives.

Several state systems involved in the Quality Collaboratives project had previously implemented new system-wide outcomes-based general education requirements, but then left to individual institutions and programs the responsibility for developing and aligning curricular requirements with a common set of outcomes. Institutions, in turn, tasked working groups of faculty and administrative leaders with developing appropriate assessment approaches

and metrics for reporting results. These measures were used at the institutional level to hold the institution itself accountable for quality learning outcomes and for increased student success in general education pathways and degree programs.

The Degree Qualifications Profile offered a valuable starting point from which many of the participating institutions and state-level policy makers began to make explicit the goals and critical outcomes of general education pathways within and across transfer institutions. The value of the Degree Qualifications Profile as an overarching educational framework was largely determined by the context in which participants in the Quality Collaboratives project were working and, in part, by the kinds of projects that were already underway in a given state. If the faculty were already working together at a relatively comprehensive level, guided by recent developments in state policy or articulation agreements, for example, and if they were assisted by cross-institutional or cross-disciplinary support structures, such as workshops or professional learning communities, then models such as those developed through AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative and its close relative, the Degree Qualifications Profile, proved to be useful for guiding the collaborative work of faculty in the development of educational pathways.

Where the work was still focused on the level of individual courses and course equivalencies across institutions, the Degree Qualifications Profile made little sense to faculty participants and was not easily incorporated into their work. (The analogy of the use of different carpentry tools for framing rather than for detail work comes to mind.)

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## Policy and Collaborative Projects as Levers for Change and Alignment

Thoughtful policy leaders can take advantage of projects like Quality Collaboratives and developments like the release of the Degree Qualifications Profile to create environments in which educators can experiment with new approaches to mapping and assessing equitable student learning, and system or institutional leaders can begin to develop and use new policy levers. AAC&U has used its expertise in student learning outcomes, proven educational practices, and new approaches to assessment throughout the Quality Collaboratives project to help teams find new mechanisms for educational change and to align external policies, internal policies and processes, curricular designs, and assessment and reporting practices with desired outcomes in a more cohesive and meaningful way. Across the states that participated in the project, successful or promising efforts to create this greater alignment fell into one of the four broad categories described below.

The value of convening to disseminate innovative approaches should not be underestimated.

**1. Using the power to convene:** *Using mandates for improvements to encourage constructive dialogue or professional development opportunities among faculty members across institutions that share students (e.g., two-year and four-year partner institutions within state systems) and, thereby, ensuring greater alignment of targeted learning outcomes, curricular programs, and general education and major pathways.* This particular lever emerged from an unexpected but instructive trend among state policy leaders working on policy change and incentivizing campus-based innovation. While campus-specific practitioners focused on assessment, collaboration, and educational practice, state policy leaders were able to observe and draw connections between campus work and larger state policy questions.

Although policy implications do not typically center on the value of statewide or cross-campus convening, the meaning-making and dissemination impacts of these approaches are promising for making statewide change in practice and in promoting the long-term sustainability of innovations. In one state experiencing a reorganization of higher education governance, summits were used to consolidate the knowledge emerging from Quality Collaboratives and similar projects. These summits disseminated knowledge among a broad base of practitioners in a way that fit meaningfully with the state's student-success and completion goals. They helped reduce mounting "initiative fatigue" among practitioners who had trouble seeing the connections between and among ongoing initiatives. Depending on its governance structure or culture, a state system cannot always impose mandates successfully. Nonetheless, the value of convening to disseminate innovative approaches should not be underestimated.

**2. Responding creatively to state and system mandates:** *Facilitating better alignment between educational or societal goals and institutional and state higher education policies by building on existing frameworks or connecting with other ongoing institutional change projects or mandates.* A number of Quality Collaboratives teams, led by state policy leaders, aligned their projects to other longstanding or emerging state or system mandates related to transfer or general education reform. In Utah, this approach resulted in the Degree Qualifications



Profile being introduced into a new transfer policy bill. Working within existing policy, several states used the Quality Collaboratives project and its attention to quality and assessment in the context of implementing existing transfer and general education policies to ensure that students receive the quality instruction they need at all institutions. In other words, state policy leaders were able to use the on-the-ground results from this collaborative project as evidence of how cross-institutional work on transfer and learning outcomes can change and deepen statewide conversations about improving transfer and student success. As one state policy leader reflected, “learning outcomes should propel the work forward” and unite the many initiatives with the goal of creating “an unbroken pathway between community colleges and universities.”

**3. Creating mechanisms that meld learning and other investments (money, time, effort):** *Generating data that can be used to assess and improve courses, programs, pedagogies, and student supports to ensure that students successfully make progress through and across institutional pathways and learn what they need to learn along the way.* A number of the states involved in the Quality Collaboratives project were able to leverage existing statewide groups and projects designed to advance student success and learning. These established and state-funded structures, including groups in Massachusetts (see appendix), Virginia (Virginia Assessment Group), and Oregon (Learning Outcomes and Assessment Group), were ideal venues for project participants seeking to tap into expertise and gather evidence of improved learning. Such groups, supported by policy makers and state funding, can directly promote promising evidence-based innovations in the areas of assessment and aligned student pathways. In various ways, some of these groups created mechanisms for campus investment in learning and completion. They also created state-level incentives for such investment by leveraging funding models and statewide grant programs. In contrast, some project participants who were unable to connect with such coordinating bodies struggled to find traction for critical cross-campus and cross-sector work.

The most direct policy lever for improving transfer pathways through aligned student learning is the creation of policy structures that collect data about student learning outcomes and use these data for the purpose of improving curricula and student transfer pathways.

**4. Improving evidence for learning and transfer success:** *Generating data that educators and institutions can use to hold themselves responsible for alignment between expectations and outcomes, as well as for supporting and advancing completion with demonstrated achievement of quality learning outcomes.* Arguably, the most direct policy lever for improving transfer pathways through aligned student learning is the creation of policy structures that collect data about student learning outcomes and use these data for the purpose of improving curricula and student transfer pathways. In many ways, however, this is also the most advanced and fraught policy change. Other strategies described in this section focus on the cultivation or dissemination of assessment-based practice to enhance existing work and policy related to general education and transfer within a state. Taken to the next level, states can begin to integrate their strategies for assessment and improvement into policies and practices related to transfer and general education.

Wisconsin took a step in this direction by designing the University of Wisconsin System’s competency-based Flexible Option program (see appendix). This



step both supported and was supported by innovative work taking place on the campuses in Wisconsin that were involved in the Quality Collaboratives project. The implementation process was successful largely because it fit into a wider conversation about institutional policy change and created opportunities to clarify and align all learning activities along a pathway—curricular and cocurricular—in order to maximize student success, achievement of workforce-related outcomes, and even efficiency.

## **Toward a New Framework for Completion with Demonstrated Quality Learning**

Taken together, the levers used by project participants and the two models presented earlier in this chapter—the learning productivity model and the equity-inclusive model—constitute a conceptual foundation on which the perspectives and foci of educators and policy makers can be brought together. What would a model for using data for purposes of improvement and strategic investment look like if it hinged on disaggregated evidence of student learning? How can existing models for statewide investment, current and emerging transfer and general education policies, and statewide collaborative projects be leveraged to transform a system relying on proxies for student learning (e.g., credits and completion rates) into one grounded in the actual assessment of student learning with a focus on equitable outcomes?

The Quality Collaboratives project focused its work on exploring the development of a system for bringing inputs, processes, and outcomes into alignment in both policy and practice in such a way that leaders can collect and use evidence and promote changes in order to better serve students and communities. From a policy standpoint, this work should culminate in a new framework for quality assurance, a new framework for telling the story of students' transformative learning in higher education. This new framework should unite completion, learning, and equity in order to create degrees that are valued by students, parents, legislators, and employers alike; it should help practitioners, leaders, and scholars better understand how students are being served and the ways in which individual programs are or are not helping all students succeed; and it should help close any gaps by engaging faculty and identifying systemic strengths in order to transform the higher education system into a system that serves all students well.

This new framework should unite completion, learning, and equity in order to create degrees that are valued by students, parents, legislators, and employers alike.





## APPENDIX

# How States Are Connecting Quality Learning with Transfer and Completion: Four Brief Case Studies

Educational leaders in the Quality Collaboratives project worked within their own unique state policy environments to align curricular designs, assessment methods, and transfer policies—with each other and with a vision of twenty-first-century learning outcomes. More work, however, is clearly needed at both the state and national levels to develop a shared framework for quality learning as well as for gathering and reporting data on that framework.

The Quality Collaboratives state partners are pioneers in this effort. Based on reports from participants, the case studies below reveal some initial strategies that can be used to lay the groundwork for new approaches to assessment, accountability, and policy alignment. Any new framework must include new forms of data that institutions and state systems can use to hold themselves accountable not only for better completion rates and more efficient curricular pathways, but also for demonstrated student achievement of the most important outcomes of a quality twenty-first-century undergraduate education.

Systems, coordinating bodies, and boards play a critical role in terms of convening leaders and educators and building partnerships that foster critical capacities, networks, and alignment through shared vision.

### **Kentucky Forms Statewide Professional Learning Communities**

A defining and enduring outcome of the Quality Collaboratives project in Kentucky was the development of a network of statewide Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). This initiative began with the convening of the statewide Biology Professional Learning Community, which consisted of biology faculty members from across Kentucky's public universities and from the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. Evaluations from this group's first meeting indicated that members appreciated the opportunity to develop a local network of faculty colleagues with whom to share information and ideas. On the heels of this success, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education convened three new PLCs, one each for statistics, mathematics, and developmental mathematics faculty.

During the Quality Collaboratives project, and over the course of three daylong meetings, PLC members discussed statewide quantitative reasoning outcomes, explored consensus among faculty regarding assessment of student work, and collaborated to design quantitative reasoning assignments and courses. AAC&U Senior Scholar Gary Brown led each PLC's first meeting, focusing each group's work on reviewing quantitative reasoning outcomes and assessing sample student work using a rubric developed through AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project. Results from this first round of meetings revealed that, within and across PLCs, there was an impressive amount of consensus regarding the quality of students' work. During the second set of meetings, PLC members shared their own quantitative reasoning assignments and student work products. Results from this second



round of meetings revealed that the consensus among faculty remained high when evaluating their own students' work products, and that scaffolding students' learning within and across courses was crucial to their success. The discussions led to important resolutions to redesign assignments to improve student learning and advancement. In the third set of meetings, PLC members were asked to move past assignment design and consider course design, working in groups to create "ideal" quantitative reasoning courses without regard to cost, faculty course loads, or other barriers.

Systems, coordinating bodies, and boards play a critical role in terms of convening leaders and educators and building partnerships that foster critical capacities, networks, and alignment through shared vision. While these groups in Kentucky did not define or revise specific policies, their work was nonetheless important to changing the larger environment insofar as it built professional capacity, awareness, evidence, and goodwill across state systems. Greater assessment and collaborative capacity across two-year and four-year institutions can improve a state's ability to create and implement policies that advance student success goals.

### Indiana Leverages a New General Education Transfer Core Policy

The participation of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and Ivy Tech Community College, Central Indiana Region, in the Quality Collaboratives project coincided with several important and relevant policy developments. Prior to the launch of the project, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education had released *Reaching Higher, Achieving More*, its "success agenda for higher education in Indiana." The agenda highlights three areas of targeted activity and data collection: completion, productivity, and quality. Participants in the Quality Collaboratives project were able to provide input regarding the challenges and opportunities of generating information about the quality of undergraduate education in Indiana.

The project also coincided with the passage of legislation mandating a new statewide transferable general education core for all public two-year and four-year institutions in Indiana. The new core policy charged teams of faculty to work together with the Indiana Commission for Higher Education in identifying competency domains and specific learning outcomes for first- and second-year common general education requirements, while it left it to individual institutions to develop the specific courses and curricular pathways through which students would develop those outcomes. While the legislation did not mandate assessment of the learning outcomes, participation in the Quality Collaboratives project and other Lumina Foundation-supported initiatives, such as those associated with the Degree Qualifications Profile and the Tuning projects related to the outcomes of disciplinary majors, enabled faculty at several institutions in the state to begin collaborative efforts to better assess student achievement of the articulated learning outcomes developed as part of the Indiana statewide transferable general education core. Through the Quality Collaboratives project, it became very clear

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that one area of needed improvement was in the design of specific assignments through which students could demonstrate their achievement of the core learning outcomes. Through workshops and a statewide summit, Indiana educators and educational leaders began a broad effort to expand the engagement of faculty and develop a common vocabulary and trust across institutions through which greater coherence and achievement could be attained in alignment with the goals set forth in *Reaching Higher, Achieving More*.

This effort revealed challenges to the full alignment of curricular pathways and learning outcomes, but it also began a very productive process of increasing transparency and building trust across institutions. Future work can build on this initial set of activities in order ultimately to develop evidence of student learning that can help the system ensure that all students are not only “completing” general education courses, but that they also are attaining the learning outcomes the community of educators and policy makers agrees are essential for all students.

### Massachusetts Invests in Innovation and Accountability for Student Learning

Massachusetts developed a statewide approach to learning outcomes assessment as part of the multifaceted and accountability-oriented Vision Project begun in 2010. The Department of Higher Education and public campuses work together in the Vision Project to measure achievement on seven key outcomes areas (college participation, college completion, student learning, workforce alignment, preparing citizens, closing achievement gaps, and research that supports economic development), compare their accomplishments to those of other states, and present an annual report to the people of Massachusetts. For the student learning outcome, the Department of Higher Education recognized that it was moving into policy areas dominated by campuses and faculties. The first step, taken with the support of the Davis Educational Foundation, was to build a structure—named Advancing a Massachusetts Culture of Assessment—that relied on active involvement by faculty and academic leadership as well as cross-campus collaboration. Collectively, campuses and the Department of Higher Education petitioned AAC&U for Massachusetts to become an official “LEAP state” and used LEAP principles and practices (including assessment of authentic student work using VALUE rubrics instead of standardized tests) to build a statewide framework that would support campus-based formative efforts to improve the quality of student learning and to promote system-wide accountability through comparison and public reporting.

An initial pilot test of the statewide model with seven campuses in Massachusetts suggested promise, but the involvement of other states is needed for the comparison-based model to succeed. AAC&U, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, and the state of Massachusetts worked together to develop the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment. With financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Multi-State Collaborative was launched in 2013, and a pilot study involving nine states and

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sixty-nine campuses is now nearing completion. This initiative also is exploring the capacity of states and campuses to measure student learning in ways that serve campus efforts to improve the quality of student learning and state system efforts to demonstrate accountability for student learning on public campuses.

The student learning work provided an opportunity for the Quality Collaboratives project in Massachusetts to broaden the policy scope to include transfer between two-year and four-year public campuses and to broaden the analytic scope to include the Degree Qualifications Profile. Mount Wachusett Community College and Fitchburg State University developed cross-campus faculty teams to create and test assessment approaches for written communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, and civic engagement that will help students transfer more effectively. This work forms the basis for an ongoing program of faculty professional development. Middlesex Community College and the University of Massachusetts Lowell established cross-campus faculty teams in four high-transfer disciplinary areas. The teams mapped and scaffolded their curricular pathways, designed assignments, and assessed student quantitative literacy with VALUE rubrics mapped to the Degree Qualifications Profile. They created a model that will serve other campuses in Massachusetts well.

The Department of Higher Education continues to provide for the structures created by Advancing a Massachusetts Culture of Assessment initiative: regional campus groupings that operate as learning communities for exploration of new approaches for improving student learning; a task force representing twenty-two individual campuses in “LEAP states” that provides oversight for statewide learning outcomes assessment; and a smaller collaborative design team to work with the department’s director of assessment on developing practices, especially the Multi-State Collaborative pilot study, which is also the second pilot for Massachusetts.

Massachusetts has also used its state-supported performance incentive funding program to continue cross-campus collaborative work in support of student learning and the work of the two pairs of campuses that worked together through the Quality Collaboratives project. Based on project results, Massachusetts will broaden the scope of discussions among already established “transfer pathway teams” in psychology, history, economics, chemistry, biology, and political science to include collaborative learning outcomes development and assessment. Department of Higher Education and Vision Project commitments—to developing evidence of the quality of student learning on public campuses, to accountability through comparison and public reporting, and to nourishing state system and campus collaboration—have opened the door to substantive and lasting policy change.

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## Wisconsin Embeds Enhanced Quality Metrics into Curricular Transformation Initiatives

Higher education operates in a policy world that values outputs—credits and credit hours, courses, grades, seat time—that say little about the quality and depth



of student learning. In many states, it can be difficult to embed student learning outcomes into policy discussions focused on student transfer, success, and completion. The University of Wisconsin System has moved on multiple fronts to embed an alternative set of student success metrics whose use results in better collection of data and evidence related to the quality of student learning, thus disrupting the status quo. This work has begun to “move the needle” for policy in the system, the state, and even the nation—from continuing to cling to the credit hour and seat time as proxies for learning, toward adopting a new assessment-centered core. The Quality Collaboratives project has been a centerpiece of this transformative work.

Through extensive curricular mapping guided by use of the Degree Qualifications Profile, the four-year University of Wisconsin–Parkside and the two-year University of Wisconsin–Waukesha focused their Quality Collaboratives work on moving beyond credits to lay bare the competencies required for students pursuing the collaborative bachelor of arts in applied science degree, a new degree-completion program offered by the University of Wisconsin Colleges. The two campuses adapted Degree Qualifications Profile competencies, which serve as a more meaningful currency of student learning. In partnership with the University of Wisconsin System’s other Quality Collaboratives “dyad” (composed of the four-year University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh and the two-year University of Wisconsin–Fox Valley), project leaders worked to modify institutional policies and to educate faculty and student affairs colleagues, along with students, on the importance of these changes, with a focus on improved transfer outcomes between two-year and four-year campuses. In the end, students are the clear beneficiaries; they are able to document, within their educational pathways and for potential employers, evidence of their achievement of specific learning outcomes.

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The University of Wisconsin System’s Quality Collaboratives project coincided with two other system-wide initiatives focused on student learning outcomes and competencies: the University of Wisconsin Flexible Option and the Lumina Foundation–funded Prior Learning Assessment initiative. With the Quality Collaboratives campuses also involved in both of these initiatives, the unfolding curricular development and assessment work has overlapped in remarkably productive ways. The exchange and dialogue among the different modalities and delivery models has been extremely productive, and the Quality Collaboratives project has informed and enriched the development of the Flexible Option curricula, the bachelor of arts in applied science degree, and the Prior Learning Assessment initiative—and vice versa.

As a result of the changes catalyzed by campus-specific project work, Wisconsin is seeing a big emerging change: a real move away from dependence on individual courses and credits—necessary but insufficient measures—as the only currency for student learning. The Quality Collaboratives project, along with other initiatives related to the Flexible Option and the Prior Learning Assessment initiative, were transformative levers for changing how student learning is defined, measured, and represented by students, institutions, and—moving forward—policy makers and employers.



## Toward Assuring the Quality of a College Degree

As these four cases illustrate, approaches to advancing and assessing student learning will necessarily vary across and within individual states. The problems that cause misalignment among the various elements of the educational enterprise, particularly as they relate to the transfer experience, are complex; so, too, are the problems that result from such misalignment. There are no simple solutions; there is no single formula that can be applied successfully in all settings. There is, however, great value in approaching shared problems as a community of educational leaders committed to quality and in learning from one another's experiences.

On the whole, what the Quality Collaboratives project demonstrated is the benefit of a common set of reference points for quality. As project participants developed and experimented with highly various approaches to aligning curricular designs, assessment methods, and transfer policies—all within their own unique campus contexts—their work was anchored by the Degree Qualifications Profile. Different though the policy environments and interventions were, the Degree Qualifications Profile enabled project participants to form a community of shared learning and innovation.

Taken together, the results of the project and the experience of the participants—educators, policy makers, state and system leaders alike—point to the need to build on this work and to develop a new framework for quality assurance, one that combines completion, learning, and equity. Such a framework would support the progress and success of all students, contribute to greater coherence of the educational experience as a whole, and inspire greater confidence in the quality of a college degree. It also would provide valuable information to educators, policy makers, and the general public about exactly how well higher education institutions are serving the public good.



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## About the Quality Collaboratives Project

Part of AAC&U's ongoing Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, **Quality Collaboratives** was a three-year project (2011–2014) designed to improve faculty assessment of student learning outcomes within the context of student transfer. Using Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile as a common reference point for quality, project participants from two-year and four-year campuses in nine states focused on assessment practices, faculty leadership and development opportunities, and policies related to student learning and success. Pilot efforts stemming from the QC project are currently underway on campuses in each of the nine participating states, and system leaders are using the results to inform the development of new policies, frameworks, and models of faculty development that are appropriate for their entire systems. The Quality Collaboratives project was supported by funding from Lumina Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

## About LEAP

**Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)** is 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. Today, and in the years to come, college graduates need higher levels of learning and knowledge as well as strong intellectual and practical skills to navigate this more demanding environment successfully and responsibly. Launched in 2005, LEAP challenges the traditional practice of providing liberal education to some students and narrow training to others. Through LEAP, hundreds of campuses and several state systems are making far-reaching educational changes to help all their students—whatever their chosen major field of study—achieve a set of Essential Learning Outcomes fostered through a liberal education.



## About AAC&U

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,300 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size. AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education and inclusive excellence at both the national and local levels, and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).



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