

## Environmental Context

AAC&U's Strategic priorities build on the association's long history of leadership for liberal education, but they also take into account the changing educational and policy environment. Presented below are some of the most salient features of that environment that are likely to affect AAC&U's work in the coming years.

### Broad Trends in Higher Education

- **Innovation, “scaling,” and far-reaching systemic change** - intended to create new efficiencies in cost while dramatically increasing degree attainment and college “success” - have become urgent priorities across all arenas in which educational change is discussed. Some proposals for systemic change are aligned with AAC&U's current work. Other proposals move in a different direction, most notably the drive toward “delivering” learning in formats that accelerate the fragmentation of the student's educational experience.
- **Quality** is emerging as a **prominent policy concern** in the national effort to increase degree attainment dramatically, but **quality is still “trumped”** by the emphatic focus on accelerating degree **completion**. The quality agenda needs to be aligned with the mounting sense of urgency about increasing productivity, supporting underserved students success, and reducing the cost of college. The Degree Qualifications Profile, (DQP) now being beta tested by Lumina Foundation through a series of significant grants, is eliciting both enthusiasm and concern across higher education. There is enthusiasm for the broad dimensions of the profile and for its emphasis on intentional and integrative learning (two major AAC&U priorities).
- **Innovations designed to introduce efficiencies into higher education institutions or systems also are being introduced in the context of the swirl** in student enrollment patterns. AAC&U is uniquely positioned to make the case that the postsecondary system as a whole would be more effective and efficient if Essential Learning Outcomes were emphasized by all campuses, for all students, across progressively higher levels of learning. Yet many in higher education are concerned that any shared framework for high-quality student learning may undermine institutional autonomy.
- **Thought leaders are beginning to discuss whether students are learning enough in college.** The abundant evidence of a shortfall has not yet been connected to the continuing decrease in public financial support for higher education, however, and the discussion is happening in a context to increased public skepticism about general value of college degree.
- There is a **search for new forms of accountability**, but the **standardized testing mindset** is still so pervasive that policy makers and members of the general public almost reflexively identify “assessment” with tests, such as the SAT or GRE, that report findings parsimoniously with few numbers. There is an urgent need to develop ways of reporting assessment findings based on student work that match test scores in perceived transparency and significance.
- **The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) places a strong emphasis on assessing student's authentic work.** There is an opportunity, through AAC&U's work both LEAP and on the DQP, to advance a “sea change” across higher education in what counts as meaningful evidence by giving primacy to students' demonstrated accomplishments across curriculum and by reducing the role of the standardized test.
- The **continued increase in contingent faculty appointments is an “elephant in the room”** for American higher education, threatening the future of scholarly community and putting at grave risk AAC&U's commitment to high-quality liberal education and inclusive excellence for

**all.** The strength of American higher education in that last century came from the integration of scholarship and teaching. That integration is central to one of the core goals of liberal education: teaching students the arts of evidence-based inquiry, analysis, and judgment. The link between teaching and research has been cut almost completely by the so-called “new providers” that many in policy and philanthropy see as models for efficiencies in “cost” and “delivery.” Even in the not-for-profit sector, the majority of teaching is now done by non-tenure-line- faculty and/or graduate students.

- AAC&U’s publication of research on “**high-impact practices**” has elicited widespread engagement and interest. Institutions are seeking better tools for tracking the extent of students’ participation in high-impact practices. There also is keen interest in expanded research on **the benefits of high-impact practices for underserved students.**
- There is equal enthusiasm for AAC&U’s work on **authentic assessment-using the LEAP VALUE rubrics, portfolios, and student work-** and recognition that students engaged in high-impact practices are, by definition, producing work that can be sampled for assessment purposes.
- As the systemic reform of American higher education advances, AAC&U is well positioned by its mission and history to provide **credible, faculty-friendly, national leadership regarding the aims, outcomes, practices, and forms of assessment that can be used to strengthen and demonstrate educational quality.**

### **Broad Trends in Liberal Education**

- Many of the broader changes AAC&U seeks to advance can be effectively illustrated in the context of **STEM teaching and learning**-an arena that is widely seen as crucial to Americans’ future. There is an **opportunity to make STEM a demonstration site for the revitalization of liberal education.** AAC&U’s Project Kaleidoscope is well positioned to advance its strategic goal of graduating more liberally educated STEM graduates and more STEM-literate liberally educated citizens in light of this opportunity.
- **The assault on/dismissal of the humanities and many of the social sciences continues apace in many sectors.** AAC&U’s own research shows widespread confusion about what is included among “the liberal arts” and, simultaneously, a strong public conviction that these fields are not useful.
- **While many in higher education have been working to strengthen students’ global knowledge, this goal is not yet a policy priority.** Global learning has been left to a later day in school reform, and despite the constant invocation of the United States’ desire to remain a “global leader,” there is no discernible policy effort to add global knowledge and engagement to national accountability frameworks for higher education. National leadership is needed to determine the **meaning and content of global knowledge and competence and to foreground the role of the humanities, arts, and social sciences in developing global acumen.**
- It also remains a challenge to make the case for **civic learning and democratic engagement as essential rather than optional** in postsecondary education. Helping students develop their global knowledge through engagement with issues that ultimately affect the public good may help build policy and public support for civic learning as an expected component of college study.
- Many higher education leaders who want to **renew higher education’s commitment to civic learning** (US and global) believe this renewal needs to be tied to the new national emphasis on increased student success. They ask, in other words, **will civic learning increase persistence**

and promote **employability**? Mindful citizenship has become harder to defend as a core educational purpose in its own right. However, employers increasingly view **civic engagement and social responsibility** as important factors in selecting, developing, and evaluating business leaders.

- **General education is now caught in the cross fire that attends effort to accelerate degree “production,”** reduce costs, and improve quality. Each of AAC&U’s educational priorities requires a coherent and vibrant general education, and general education remains a necessary if not sufficient component of any robust liberal education. There is an opportunity to revitalize general education as the public face of liberal education by linking it directly to the global, civic, and equity challenges all college graduates will confront.
- Although AAC&U actively promotes vertical, thematic and integrative designs for general education that involve upper- as well as lower-division studies, there is a growing policy effort to standardize **general education across two- and four-year public institutions by reducing the scope of the program so that required hours will be similar at both types of institution.** Moreover, a growing fraction of general education now is provided prior to college entrance. In sum, general education requirements are being reduced, while growing parts of the general education curriculum are being assigned to high schools.
- Effort to limit general education notwithstanding, AAC&U surveys and meeting enrollments demonstrate that **hundreds of AAC&U members are working actively to strengthen general education** and to make it more purposeful, public-spirited, and integrative. These members seek AAC&U’s assistance in advancing and supporting their work.
- The entities experimenting with **Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)** have turned their attention to the **general education curriculum** and to finding less expensive way to help move underserved students through their required courses. But many MOOCs are designed with low-level tests, online tutorials, and no research or writing assignments and, therefore, are unlikely to contribute to students’ development of high-level capacities for inquiry, analysis, and the use of evidence to reach conclusions. Moreover, the design of many MOOCs is not based on research about “what works” to support college success for underserved students.
- The spirit and details of the **Common Core State Standards** initiative<sup>1</sup> are highly congruent with AAC&U’s work on the practices that foster liberal education. The standards urge that students work early and often on **evidence-based analysis, research, and writing** during the school years. AAC&U’s future work on curriculum and pedagogy should align with these intended standards.
- The **LEAP Presidents’ Trust**<sup>2</sup> is becoming both visible and vocal, as presidents who have joined it - and others influenced by them-promote the economic, civic, global, and personal benefits of liberal education through their own speeches, editorials, nationally visible blogs, and well-publicized campus-hosted conferences. The Trust is poised to become a leadership resource for AAC&U’s next generation of work to revitalize liberal education and promote its value.

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<sup>1</sup> Sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core State Standards initiative seeks to align state K-12 curricula through the adoption of clearly defined standards for students learning. The standards define the knowledge and skills that high school graduates need to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.

<sup>2</sup> The LEAP Presidents Trust is a leadership group within the Liberal Education and American’s Promise (LEAP) initiative that consists of presidents from all sectors of higher education. Trust members engage with campus and key external stakeholders about the core purposes and practices of liberal education, and provide leadership for advancing reforms in the practice of liberal education both on campus and with other groups and organizations with which they are affiliated. For more information, see [www.aacu.org/leap/presidentstrust](http://www.aacu.org/leap/presidentstrust).

- The higher education community values AAC&U's work on **employer endorsement of the outcomes associated with liberal education** and wants AAC&U to expand that work significantly. Members of the LEAP Presidents' Trust are prepared to take a leadership role in AAC&U's future work with employers.
- As AAC&U prepares to celebrate its **centennial**, there is every incentive for the association to become even more proactive in advocating for the value of liberal education, in forming research partnerships focused on practices that help students achieve a liberal education, and in fostering new creativity on campus to ensure a vibrant and inclusive future for the nation's signature educational tradition.