An Introduction to LEAP

Liberal Education & America’s Promise
Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College
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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 individual student success and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality.

The LEAP vision for college-level learning described in this booklet provides the intellectual framework for high-quality college learning. Through LEAP, we seek to Make Excellence Inclusive by providing

- **Essential Learning Outcomes**—the learning outcomes essential for success in life, civil society, and work in the twenty-first century (see page 4).
- **High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs)**—engaging and challenging students through first-year programs, intensive writing, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, service learning, internships, learning communities, diversity experiences, and major projects that help students achieve Essential Learning Outcomes.
- **Authentic Assessments**—using students’ own work and faculty-validated rubrics, probing whether individual students have developed essential capacities and can apply their learning to complex problems and real-world challenges.

LEAP leaders also work to engage the public with core questions about what really matters in college and to connect employers and educators as they build new partnerships and make the case for the importance of liberal education in the global economy and in our diverse democracy.

The LEAP vision guides all aspects of AAC&U’s educational work with colleges, universities, community colleges, and state systems.

Explore LEAP Resources and Publications

Through LEAP, AAC&U has developed a suite of online and print resources valuable for campus curricular change projects and for both external and internal communications and advocacy for liberal education.

To download or order print publications, see [www.aacu.org/leap/publications](http://www.aacu.org/leap/publications). See other online resources, including *The LEAP Challenge Blog* at [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).
The LEAP Initiative Provides:

- **National, State, and Institutional Leadership**
  The LEAP National Leadership Council includes educational, business, community, and policy leaders who exercise strong advocacy for liberal education nationally and in their own spheres of influence.

  The Presidents’ Trust includes leaders from all sectors of higher education who are committed to advocating for the vision, values, and practices that connect liberal education with the needs of the twenty-first century.

- **Campus-Based Reform and Funded Campus and State System Initiatives**
  The Campus Action Network (CAN) provides support for LEAP efforts at individual institutions. Through the CAN, institutions work to ensure that all their students achieve the Essential Learning Outcomes, to expand their use of high-impact educational practices, and to use authentic assessments to track student progress.

  In the LEAP States Initiative, state system leaders, institutional administrators, and faculty from two-year and four-year campuses are collaborating within and across states to raise levels of inclusion and success for all students. They are working on issues of quality and student success through campus action and curricular and systemic reform.

- **Research and Resources on Documenting Student Achievement**
  LEAP provides reports and research on such topics as student achievement of key learning outcomes, making the case for liberal education, high-impact educational practices, and assessment of learning outcomes.

  The VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) initiative is an approach to learning assessment that privileges authentic assessment of student work and shared understanding of student learning outcomes on campus. A set of sixteen VALUE rubrics—available for use at any institution—keyed to the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes has been developed collaboratively by teams of faculty and academic professionals.

- **Research on the Economic Value of Liberal Education Outcomes**
  Through LEAP, AAC&U has commissioned several studies of the learning students need in a fast-changing economy. National surveys of employers show that, across many fields and sectors of the economy, employers seek college graduates who have achieved a broad set of liberal education outcomes.

In 2015, AAC&U launched the next decade of LEAP with the LEAP Challenge

The LEAP Challenge invites colleges and universities to make Signature Work a goal for all students—and the expected standard of quality learning in college. See page 6 for more information about the LEAP Challenge.
LEAP Vision for Inclusive Excellence

Guided Learning Pathways, Essential Learning Outcomes, High Student Achievement

**STARTING IN SCHOOL...**
- Rigorous and rich curriculum focused on the Essential Learning Outcomes
- Comprehensive, individualized, and learning-centered advising
- Participation in service learning and civic engagement activities
- Substantive culminating projects assessed for achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes

**LEARNING DEEPENED THROUGH CHALLENGING STUDIES IN COLLEGE, INCLUDING...**
- Broad, integrative learning in the liberal arts and sciences—focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring
- Analytic, applied, and integrative learning across all major fields, both preprofessional and liberal arts and sciences
- Active involvement with diverse communities, real-world problems, and social responsibilities
- Milestone and culminating experiences that connect general, major, and field-based learning through Signature Work

**PREPARING ALL STUDENTS FOR SIGNATURE WORK...**
- Grounded in Essential Learning Outcomes
- Rich in Inquiry-based and Integrative Learning
- At progressively more challenging levels
- Evaluated consistently through milestone and capstone assessments
- For all students—including and especially those from underserved communities

**ENRICHED BY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH-IMPACT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES...**
- First-year seminars and experiences
- Common intellectual experiences
- Learning communities
- Writing-intensive courses
- Undergraduate research
- Collaborative assignments and projects
- Diversity and global learning
- Service and community-based learning
- Internships
- Capstone courses and projects
The Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students can prepare for both responsible citizenship and a global economy by achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs).

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

• Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

• Inquiry and analysis
• Critical and creative thinking
• Written and oral communication
• Quantitative literacy
• Information literacy
• Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

Personal and Social Responsibility, including

• Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
• Intercultural knowledge and competence
• Ethical reasoning and action
• Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative and Applied Learning, including

• Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

Note: This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. The findings are documented in previous publications of the Association of American Colleges and Universities: College Learning for the New Global Century (2007) and The LEAP Vision for Learning (2011). For more information, see www.aacu.org/leap.
The Principles of Excellence

The Principles of Excellence offer both challenging standards and flexible guidance for an era of educational reform and renewal. These Principles can be used to guide change in any college, university, or community college. They are intended to influence practice across the disciplines as well as in general education programs.

**Principle One**

*Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive*
Make the Essential Learning Outcomes a Framework for the Entire Educational Experience, Connecting School, College, Work, and Life

**Principle Two**

*Give Students a Compass*
Focus Each Student’s Plan of Study on Achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes—and Assess Progress

**Principle Three**

*Teach the Arts of Inquiry and Innovation*
Immerse All Students in Analysis, Discovery, Problem Solving, and Communication, Beginning in School and Advancing in College

**Principle Four**

*Engage the Big Questions*
Teach through the Curriculum to Far-Reaching Issues—Contemporary and Enduring—in Science and Society, Cultures and Values, Global Interdependence, the Changing Economy, and Human Dignity and Freedom

**Principle Five**

*Connect Knowledge with Choices and Action*
Prepare Students for Citizenship and Work through Engaged and Guided Learning on “Real-World” Problems

**Principle Six**

*Foster Civic, Intercultural, and Ethical Learning*
Emphasize Personal and Social Responsibility, in Every Field of Study

**Principle Seven**

*Assess Students’ Ability to Apply Learning to Complex Problems*
Use Assessment to Deepen Learning and Establish a Culture of Shared Purpose and Continuous Improvement
The LEAP Challenge: Signature Work for All Students

The LEAP Challenge invites colleges and universities to make Signature Work a goal for all students—and the expected standard of quality learning in college.

What Is Signature Work?

In Signature Work, a student uses his or her cumulative learning to pursue a significant project related to a problem she or he defines. In the project conducted throughout at least one semester, the student takes the lead and produces work that expresses insights and learning gained from the inquiry and demonstrates the skills and integrative knowledge that characterize a twenty-first-century liberal education. Faculty and mentors provide support and guidance.

Signature Work might be pursued in a capstone course or in research conducted across thematically linked courses, or in another field-based activity or internship. It might include practicums, community service, or other experiential learning. It always should include substantial writing, multiple kinds of reflection on learning, and visible results. Many students may choose to use e-portfolios to display their Signature Work products and learning outcomes.

The entire college experience should prepare students to produce high-quality Signature Work.

Why Is Signature Work So Important?

A twenty-first-century education prepares students to work with unscripted problems. Today’s graduates will participate in an economy fueled by successful innovation—and engage with diverse communities that urgently need solutions to intractable problems. Our graduates will have to secure environmental sustainability, find ways to maintain human dignity and equity in an increasingly polarized nation, and manage a world rife with conflict. They will need to balance family and career in a climate that increasingly devalues personal privacy and presents obstacles to flourishing.

Negotiating this world demands an education that explores issues from multiple perspectives and across disciplines—and that helps students apply what they learn to complex problems and questions. Signature Work is a powerful way to help students integrate various elements of their education and apply their learning in meaningful ways.

SIGNATURE WORK ADVANCES PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

Percentage of employers who say they would be more likely to consider hiring a candidate if she or he had completed an advanced, comprehensive senior project.

87%

How to Get Involved

Campus Action Network
The best way for individual campuses to get involved in LEAP is through the Campus Action Network (CAN). CAN institutions are provided opportunities to engage with AAC&U and each other around their work to improve student achievement in college. LEAP resources are provided to CAN members as they become available. Any AAC&U member institution is welcome to join the Campus Action Network.

Presidents’ Trust
The Presidents’ Trust includes presidents from all sectors of the higher education community who have made a significant commitment to providing local, regional, and national leadership for liberal education. Membership in the Trust includes a financial commitment. Any AAC&U member president may join the Trust.

LEAP States Initiative
The LEAP States Initiative brings AAC&U, state systems, and campus networks into intentional work together to advance systemic change. LEAP States supports public advocacy for liberal education and frameworks to advance Essential Learning Outcomes in general education and across the curriculum and cocurriculum. Inclusion in the LEAP States Initiative is developed through a collaborative process involving state system representatives, institutional leaders, and AAC&U.

LEAP Online and Print Resources

• Original Publications and Blogs
LEAP publishes many reports and monographs on liberal education, assessment, the Essential Learning Outcomes, high-impact educational practices, campus-based models of integrative liberal education, and ways to educate students and the public about liberal education. AAC&U also publishes The LEAP Challenge Blog, with postings from AAC&U staff and experts in the field (www.aacu.org/blog), and a weekly Liberal Education News Watch.

• LEAP Online Resource Hubs
Online, interactive resource hubs for campus practitioners and other educators to access concise, useful research narratives, examples of campus work, tools for campus change, and assessment instruments.

• Speeches and Articles on Liberal Education
The LEAP Liberal Education News Watch includes links to articles and speeches through which people from many backgrounds are effectively making the case for liberal education.

• Data and PowerPoint Presentations
LEAP-based PowerPoint slides present data that educational practitioners and leaders can use to make the case for liberal education more effectively.

• Employer Surveys and Public Opinion Research
AAC&U regularly commissions surveys of employers that explore the value of liberal education outcomes in today’s workplace. All survey findings and PowerPoint slides for use in presentations are available on the LEAP website.

For more information or to find resources, visit aacu.org/leap or contact:
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