



An Introduction to LEAP



Liberal Education & America's Promise

EXCELLENCE FOR EVERYONE AS A NATION GOES TO COLLEGE



Association
of American
Colleges and
Universities

An Introduction to 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.



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The LEAP vision for college-level learning (see pages 3–4) provides the intellectual framework for all of AAC&U's meetings, institutes, publications, and funded initiatives. Through LEAP, we seek to advance a guiding vision for high-quality education, support rigorous goals for student learning, provide evidence about student achievement of those goals, and test and report the value of practices designed to improve student achievement. 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 Goals of the LEAP Initiative

- Spark public debate about the quality of college learning for the twenty-first century and the learning outcomes that are essential for all students;
- Help all students—including those traditionally underserved by higher education—understand, prepare for, and achieve Essential Learning Outcomes (see page 4) in college;
- Challenge the belief that students must choose either a liberal education or a practical education by advancing reforms that provide both;
- Highlight and counter current practices that steer some students to narrow educational tracks while the most advantaged students reap the full benefits of a broad liberal education;
- Generate more informed public support for policies that improve the quality of college-level learning;
- Document national, state, and institutional progress in student achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes.

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 in their own spheres of influence and champion an empowering, inclusive, and public-spirited liberal education for all students.

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. Trust members are reinvigorating liberal education on their own campuses, in consortia of institutions, and in state systems. They also are making the case for liberal education in their respective spheres of influence.



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 collaborate and use LEAP resources to ensure that all their students achieve Essential Learning Outcomes, and to research and expand their use of high-impact educational practices. AAC&U uses the network as a source of positive examples and frequently highlights the work of CAN institutions in publications and presentations.

In the **LEAP States Initiative**, state system leaders, institutional administrators, and faculty from two- 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 reform—including, in particular, through frameworks to advance and assess Essential Learning Outcomes in general education, across disciplinary fields, and in transfer.

Research and Resources on Documenting Student Achievement

The **VALUE** (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) project is an approach to learning assessment that privileges authentic assessment of student work and shared understanding of student learning outcomes on campuses over reliance on standardized tests administered to samples of students outside of their required courses. A set of fifteen VALUE rubrics keyed to the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes has been developed collaboratively by teams of faculty and academic professionals. The VALUE rubrics are available for use at any institution. LEAP also 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.

Research on the Economic Value of Liberal Education Outcomes and Employer/Educator Partnerships

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 a broad set of liberal education outcomes. AAC&U also is developing and publicizing employer/educator partnerships through which students are achieving essential outcomes while putting their knowledge to use in real-world settings.

LEAP Vision for Learning in Brief



Purposeful Pathways, Essential Learning Outcomes, High Student Achievement



The Essential Learning Outcomes



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

★ Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

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

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

★ Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

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

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

★ Personal and Social Responsibility, including

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

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

★ Integrative and Applied Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

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

Note: This listing was developed through a 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.



A Guide to High-Impact Practices



Through LEAP, AAC&U has explored a set of widely-tested teaching and learning strategies that—when done well—have substantial educational benefits, especially for traditionally underserved students. The elements of good teaching and learning embedded in these programs can be applied in many settings, including traditional classrooms, special programs, and cocurricular settings.

First-Year Seminars and Experiences

First-year seminars bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis and place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies.

Common Intellectual Experiences

The older “core” curriculum model has evolved into a variety of modern forms, including common courses or vertically organized general education programs that include advanced integrative studies and/or participation in a learning community (see below). These programs combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and cocurricular options.

Learning Communities

Learning communities often encourage integration of learning across courses and involve students with “big questions” that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link liberal arts and professional courses; others feature service learning.

Writing-Intensive Courses

These courses emphasize writing at all levels and across the curriculum, including final-year projects. Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines. The effectiveness of this repeated practice “across the curriculum” has led to parallel efforts in quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy, and ethical inquiry.

Undergraduate Research

Many colleges and universities are now providing research experiences for students in all disciplines. Undergraduate research has been most prominently used in science disciplines. In these programs, scientists are reshaping their courses to connect key concepts and questions with students' early and active involvement in systematic investigation and research. The goal is to involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.

Collaborative Assignments and Projects

Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research.

Diversity and Global Learning

Many colleges and universities now emphasize courses that help students explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own. These studies—addressing US diversity, world cultures, or both—often explore “difficult differences” related to racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or human rights, freedom, and power. Frequently, intercultural studies are augmented by experiential learning in the community and/or by study abroad.

Service Learning and Community-Based Learning

In these programs, field-based “experiential learning” with community partners is an instructional strategy. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. In these programs, students *apply* what they are learning in real-world settings and *reflect* in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

Internships

Internships are another increasingly common form of experiential learning. The idea is to provide students with direct experience in a work setting—usually related to their career interests—and to give them the benefit of supervision and coaching from professionals in the field. If the internship is taken for course credit, students complete a project or paper that is approved by a faculty member.

Capstone Courses and Projects

Whether they're called “senior capstones” or some other name, these culminating experiences require students nearing the end of college to create a project that integrates and applies what they've learned. The project might be a research paper, a performance, a portfolio, or an exhibit of artwork. Capstones can be offered in departmental programs and in general education as well.

Adapted from: *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, by George D. Kuh (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2008).

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



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 of Essential Learning Outcomes 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

Members of the Presidents' Trust serve as national advocates for LEAP. The 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.

LEAP States Initiative

The LEAP States Initiative brings AAC&U, state systems, and campus networks into intentional work together to advance systemic change. Work underway in the various LEAP states stands as a model for what other institutions, consortia, and systems might accomplish. 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, Essential Learning Outcomes, high-impact educational practices, campus-based examples, and ways to educate students and the public about liberal education. AAC&U also publishes a blog, "liberal.education nation," with postings from AAC&U staff and experts in the field (blog.aacu.org).

- ***LEAP Campus Toolkit***

The LEAP Campus Toolkit is an online, interactive library for campus practitioners and other educators to access concise, useful research narratives, examples of campus work, and assessment instruments.

- ***Speeches and Articles on Liberal Education***

The LEAP website 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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www.aacu.org/leap