

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WISCONSIN-MADISON
CONVERGENCE GROUP

Liberal Education & Institutional Identity

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Experience

P E R S P E C T I V E S

The early joining of the UW-Madison Experience and LEAP made for a powerful statement that deepened our aspirations for our students—and for our institution as a whole

FOR MANY YEARS, the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) has been working with other institutions in the University of Wisconsin System to change the conversation about higher education in the state. In the spring of 2006, these partners participated in a systemwide advisory group convened to promote better understanding of liberal education and to highlight its public purpose. The

work of this advisory group converged so closely with the ongoing Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) that Wisconsin became one of the initiative's pilot states. This article describes how we, a group of people from across UW-Madison, leveraged such convergences to effect change, how we hope to maintain momentum, and what we have learned.

To understand our project, it is important to know that we are an informal, self-convened group of administrators and faculty responsible for in- and out-of-class aspects of our students' university experience. We hail from various realms within the university, and converge upon a shared commitment to liberal education and the promotion of high-impact educational practices. We use this commitment as a touchstone for work we are already doing. When we began our collaboration, we imagined that we might convert relatively small actions and limited decisions into change on a larger scale.

Those of us working on LEAP had reason to believe that while liberal education was valued

widely across campus, it was not part of daily conversation. (One of our members likened this state of affairs to a family in which the most deeply held values are not discussed explicitly at the dinner table.) Therefore, our first goal was to get people talking about student learning, liberal education, and how the LEAP essential learning outcomes (see fig. 1, page 38) relate to teaching, advising, and the other work we do with and for students.

Given that our group was self-organized and our members have varying degrees of authority, our first task was to secure strategic support from across the campus. After the provost readily supported our grassroots plan, we identified important groups of faculty and staff with whom we wanted to talk (e.g., deans from our largest undergraduate colleges, admissions and recruitment officers); we also accepted any invitation to talk to others about student learning. We found an important ally in the University General Education Committee, a group of faculty and staff instructors, advisors, and administrators who actively supported our efforts by serving as both a sounding board and an advisory council.

As we took our presentation from meeting to meeting and from group to group, we faced frustrating moments and heard various questions and objections (see fig. 2, page 39). We honed our responses and built on the enthusiasm generated as people recognized the value of LEAP and saw how discussing "essential learning" helped promote a common language to describe what UW-Madison students learn in and out of the classroom. Our listeners praised the elegance with which the essential learning outcomes were stated, and they understood the power of taking part in a national conversation about liberal education.

The members of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Convergence Group are listed in the sidebar on page 43.



As one of our members observed, this common language enhances conversations with students and their parents: “These learning

Figure 1
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 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

Reprinted from Association of American Colleges and Universities, College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007), 12. 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. For more information, please visit www.aacu.org/leap.

outcomes allow me to describe how my department's courses promote learning in areas that are not only highly valued by us, but that are also seen as important by employers and educators across the nation. [Students and parents] learn that our major and the liberal arts degree are relevant and useful.”

As some of us talked about LEAP, others sought to describe the characteristics of a distinctly UW–Madison learning experience. This group recognized that a UW–Madison education has historically been associated with helping students pursue learning opportunities that enhance thoughtful civic and social engagement and that have a strong positive impact on students' lives and on communities beyond college. This group identified a variety of opportunities, both in and out of the classroom, that engage students in learning experiences that sustain that goal. Our students are encouraged to use those experiences to create their own “UW–Madison Experience” in the context of (and in dialogue with) our traditions. When the LEAP group and the “student experience” group began to work together, the synergy took both projects to a higher level. Although LEAP had allowed us to connect our conversation about learning outcomes to the national initiative, the process of identifying a “UW–Madison Experience” linked liberal education to those “high-impact practices” (Kuh 2008) that resonate particularly well with our campus community. By coupling the two initiatives, we were able to communicate most effectively about how liberal education learning outcomes are realized and lived out *here*. Had we only addressed liberal education as it applies to any institution of higher education, the idea that we can provide a richer learning environment may not have been as readily accepted.

The essential learning outcomes provided an academic focus for discussion of the UW–Madison Experience, while the UW–Madison Experience made LEAP relevant and local by connecting it to our campus traditions and identity. As expressed in a campus document entitled “The Wisconsin Experience and the Essential Learning Outcomes”:

UW–Madison graduates become extraordinary citizens, community members, and national and global leaders. We have produced more Peace Corps and Teach for America volunteers than almost any other university in the country. More leaders of

major corporations have graduated from UW–Madison than any other university in the country. We are among the top producers of faculty members who teach at research-intensive institutions around the world. Something about the UW–Madison Experience prepares our students to become outstanding leaders who are engaged locally, nationally and globally. (University of Wisconsin–Madison)

The essential learning identified by LEAP, and the extent of our own students' engagement in high-impact practices (see fig. 3, page 40), suggested to us that liberal education is the bedrock on which our university is founded.

"The Wisconsin Experience and the Essential Learning Outcomes" was circulated across campus for broad discussion. It has been embraced by a wide variety of groups and units as

the best expression of our shared aspirations for our students. It has been adopted by governance and academic committees, used as an organizing framework for our recent reaccreditation self-study, and serves as one component of the foundation for the university's strategic framework.

Events and activities

Armed with this sense of connection and focus, and with very modest financial resources, we began to reach out strategically to specific groups that could have an even greater impact on the effort to change our campus culture.

The first group we gathered for discussion consisted of advisers, since their work involves faculty, instructional staff, student affairs professionals, administrators, and students. These colleagues advise students throughout their

Figure 2
Conversations about liberal education

Objections Raised

These are nice platitudes, but are they useful?

We shouldn't have to justify our work!

Where did these come from? Who decided these outcomes are important?

Why do we focus so much on jobs? Shouldn't we promote learning for the sake of learning?

How are these learning outcomes relevant to us, here?

My course is about [...]; I don't teach anything else, and these goals don't apply to my course.

Productive Responses

If we agree that we value these concepts, we may benefit from having a common language to communicate effectively about them and about what we do.

Like it or not, we do. We may prefer that we not have to justify what we do, but it is useful to be able to explain what we do.

AAC&U conducted a national study that engaged leaders in higher education and in business to develop the essential learning outcomes. But these outcomes should not be seen as the "lowest common denominator" for learning. They will accumulate detail and focus as they intersect with locally described learning outcomes, and as they are articulated at increasingly sophisticated levels.

Students seek assurance that what they learn has value, and we have a responsibility to ensure that it does. We know that employers value employees who are creative and who can learn; society benefits from an educated citizenry; and the goal of liberal education is not just to make a living, but to make a life.

Although these goals help us participate in state and national conversations about higher education, they also challenge us to help students attain them at our university in a distinct way.

Every course fits into a larger whole. If, in our rapidly changing world, the content of any course is rapidly outdated—what endures? What do students learn beyond course content? What if your course is the only exposure students may ever have to your field, or to the broader realm of knowledge?

Figure 3
High-impact educational practices
at UW–Madison

Certain high-impact educational practices have been widely tested and shown to be beneficial to students from diverse backgrounds (Kuh 2008). UW–Madison offers students a range of these practices throughout the college years.

In the first year:

- First-year interest groups
- Residential learning communities
- Undergraduate research scholars

In the final year(s):

- Capstones
- Internships
- Senior theses

Throughout the college years:

- Study abroad
- Service learning/community-based research
- Undergraduate research
- Student leadership (in class, such as peer mentoring, and out of class, through student organizations)
- Some aspects of general education requirements (notably communication, quantitative reasoning, and ethnic studies)

The following chart depicts bachelor's degree recipients' participation in high-impact practices:

| Graduation Year | Percentage participating in at least one activity | Percentage participating in more than one activity | Total number of degree recipients |
|-----------------|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| 2002–3 | 69% | 34% | 6,107 |
| 2003–4 | 73% | 46% | 6,156 |
| 2004–5 | 80% | 52% | 6,289 |
| 2005–6 | 84% | 57% | 6,256 |
| 2006–7 | 82% | 58% | 6,017 |
| 2007–8 | 87% | 66% | 6,175 |
| 2008–9 | 89% | 67% | 6,565 |

careers, and frequently help them consider big questions about education and purpose. The half-day symposium we held on LEAP and essential learning at UW–Madison was a success, from the keynote address by AAC&U's Debra Humphreys to break-out sessions featuring UW–Madison faculty, staff, and students.

For our second activity, we hosted structured conversations with forty members of the faculty and instructional staff who teach or influence the twenty courses taken most frequently by first-year students. During this half-day event, the group focused on two sets of questions: (1) Beyond the specific disciplinary content of your course, what do you want students to learn that will stay with them into the future? That is, what are students learning in your course beyond the content you teach them? (2) Narrowing the focus from this broad view of student learning, and moving to the more focused goals expressed in the general education requirements, what do you try to teach your student in your “breadth” area or in the relevant general education area, such as communication or quantitative reasoning? What do they learn? What do you want them to learn? How do you make these goals, which are implicit in the requirements, explicit for students?

Both activities paved the way for ongoing conversations about the “big questions” related to liberal education. Participants shared strategies for helping students make a successful transition from high school to college and for promoting skills that are useful not just for college, but for life. Participants from diverse departments were surprised to find that they all address similar issues with our newest students. Thus, discussions of “essential learning” have helped identify common ground—not just within a course or discipline, but across the campus.

At a similar event held one year later, we asked these same instructors whether they had brought essential learning concepts into the foreground in their classes. Their comments, sampled below, suggest that our conversations had a small but promising effect:

- “I’m talking about [learning outcomes] in different contexts, and drawing connections.”
- “I’ve tried to stop thinking about ‘in’ vs. ‘out’ of class learning. If our role is to shape minds to think broadly, we need to do it in broad ways.”
- “I’ve never before stated explicitly to students what I expect them to get out of course beyond the content. Articulating broader goals helped them—and me—understand the context for learning.”

We learned from these conversations that an important next step is to facilitate conversations about student learning outcomes at the departmental level.

Since many UW–Madison graduate students take positions at other colleges and universities, our third initiative focuses on graduate students. With these future faculty members in mind, we incorporate discussion of essential learning into the training provided to teaching assistants. We stress the responsibility of teaching assistants to help articulate learning outcomes for students, as well as why attaining these outcomes is relevant to students' future experiences. Teaching assistants who are assigned to required courses report that awareness of these connections helps them and their students understand the courses within the context of what is most important, both during and after college.

Interest in both the essential learning outcomes and the UW–Madison Experience continues to grow, and individuals, units, and groups on campus frequently contact us to report on how they are using these concepts in their work. Across campus, the essential learning outcomes are being used

- to connect nonacademic units and business processes to educational mission (e.g., strategic planning, technology grant selection processes);
- to describe shared aspirations that apply to other purposes (e.g., assessing student learning, reviewing programs, including learning outcomes in student employment expectations);
- to update programs (e.g., reenvisioning the honors program, reframing campus library user instruction).

The project goes viral

As more groups were drawn to and engaged in the discussion of essential learning, we were faced with what could have been a dilemma about who holds responsibility for these activities. We have come to use LEAP and the UW–Madison Experience as a rhetorical framework that allows us to discuss our goals in a common language. We now actively promote this framework as a tool that can be used by anyone who wishes to adopt it. Its use is not centrally mandated, nor do users need permission to employ it. LEAP and the UW–Madison Experience have gone viral. They have grown into a movement that no particular group owns

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but that, instead, belongs to everyone.

By now, the essential learning outcomes have been presented to and supported by groups across the campus. University-level committees—including the key governance committee addressing

academic issues and the university assessment council—have endorsed the essential learning outcomes and the UW–Madison Experience as reflecting well our shared aspirations for student learning. A wide range of other groups have also endorsed the essential learning outcomes, and are now working to incorporate the guiding principles of the UW–Madison Experience wherever they may be useful. And, we are pleased to note, this list of supporters continues to grow.

What next?

In addition to facilitating conversations and communicating with groups across the campus,



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the UW–Madison Experience is beginning to inform activities at the institutional level. For example, several campus committees are working to develop a systematic method for collecting evidence to evaluate the degree to which students are achieving the learning outcomes. We envision a cross-cutting approach to assessment, modeled on AAC&U’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education project (see www.aacu.org/value). Moreover, the Office of the Dean of Students and the College of Letters and Science are working in collaboration to use the essential learning outcomes as a framework for documenting learning in cocurricular experiences. The essential learning outcomes will be incorporated into the guidelines for program review—a highly valued and useful process—to stimulate conversations about the diverse ways departments and programs contribute to the UW–Madison Experience. These efforts will not only help improve the educational experience for students, but will also help us communicate with external audiences about higher education. The “convergence” group will continue to expand our learning community, inviting an ever-wider group of faculty and staff into these conversations through face-to-face discussion groups and Web-based tutorials.

Lessons learned

In our efforts to increase understanding on our campus of liberal education and the essential learning outcomes, we discovered that a shared framework for discussion can promote healthy institutional change and growth. Following are some of the key lessons we have learned:

- Although we adopted a convergence strategy intuitively, by gathering people from across campus around the topic of liberal education, we considered carefully who might be able to contribute and how we might strategically create or take advantage of other opportunities. Just as the “LEAP group” and the “UW–Madison Experience group” sought alignment instead of competition, we continually found ways for others to work together and contribute to the LEAP/ UW–Madison Experience campaign.
- We were able to promote change because of the breadth of our collective knowledge, the variety of type and degree of authority we hold, and our ability to leverage modest resources to support our activities. For most of us, what we do for this project is work we would do anyway—work with faculty on course innovations, assessment of programs, administration of general education—so our efforts do not feel like an add-on or a burden.



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- We have approached people and groups through extant connections and common interests—“working into the bell curve” by reaching out first to those likely to be on board already or to sympathize with the cause. As we expand our efforts, our early contacts help us convince others.
- Our work has benefited greatly from our ability to collaborate with and call upon our colleagues across the University of Wisconsin System to explore ideas, share news of success, and commiserate about challenges. We used our own social and professional networks extensively.
- Shared governance groups were included in ways commensurate with our campus culture. We sought their support for several reasons: to honor our institutional and governance traditions; to ensure that these bodies were familiar with the essential learning outcomes; and to solicit their contribution to conversations about student learning, since their voices are vital to the spread and use of this common framework. Other institutions are likely to have different experiences as these concepts intersect with their own institutional missions and cultures.
- We linked the essential learning outcomes and the UW–Madison Experience to institutional accountability and assessment. Connecting these concepts helps ensure not only that our work persists, but also that the ideas are meaningful and useful to UW–Madison’s future.
- These efforts were embedded in the university’s decennial reaccreditation process. The authors of our institutional self-study cited the convergence project, the articulation of the UW–Madison Experience, and participation in LEAP as evidence that UW–Madison values and promotes student learning in ways that suit our institutional context. By casting essential learning within a framework for an institution-wide conversation, we created a tool available to a wide variety of units that reconceptualized their work as learner-centered, demonstrating that many groups and individuals on campus evaluate the purpose and utility of their work in light of student needs. Our shared language helped many people articulate these shared values as an essential element of an institutional identity.

In retrospect, the most important lesson we learned was that the LEAP message cannot

The University of Wisconsin–Madison Convergence Group Members

Following are the members of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Convergence Group: *Lori Berquam* is the dean of students; *Mo Noonan Bischof* is assistant vice provost and cochair of the University Assessment Council; *Aaron Brower* is professor of social work and vice provost for teaching and learning; *Elaine M. Klein* is assistant dean for academic planning, program review, and assessment in the College of Letters and Science; *Ann Groves Lloyd* is associate dean for student academic affairs in the College of Letters and Science; *Jocelyn Milner* is associate provost and director of academic planning and analysis; *Rebecca Ryan* is associate director of cross-college advising services; *Wren Singer* is director of the Center for the First-Year Experience; *Jolanda Vanderwal Taylor* is associate professor of German and Dutch; *Argyle Wade* is associate dean of students; and *Nancy Westphal-Johnson* is associate dean for undergraduate education and academic administration in the College of Letters and Science, and chair of the University General Education Committee.

survive solely as an abstract set of learning goals. To become part of our institutional fabric, LEAP needed to have an institution-specific context. On our campus, the early joining of the UW–Madison Experience and LEAP made for a powerful statement that deepened our aspirations for our students—and for our institution as a whole. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with UW–M Convergence on the subject line.

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