

LYNN PASQUERELLA

# Planning for America's Future

## Educating for Democracy

FEATURED TOPIC

THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES' new five-year strategic plan for 2018–22, *We ASPIRE: Advancing Student Performance through Integration, Research, and Excellence*, was officially launched at the association's 2018 annual meeting in Washington, DC, at the end of January. Reaffirming a dedication to AAC&U's mission of advancing the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education, *We ASPIRE* reclaims higher education's civic mission of educating for democracy. In the process, it acknowledges that preparing students for work, citizenship, and life in local, national, and global contexts requires connecting

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Coming on the heels of a United Nations report detailing the rise of poverty in the United States, the 2018 gathering, "Can Higher Education Recapture the Elusive American Dream?," addressed the leadership role higher education must play in ensuring that all students have access to the dream. Despite decades-long research focusing on increasing economic segregation in America, the statistics revealed by the report proved startling: Forty million Americans live in poverty—nearly half in deep poverty—with a disproportionate number of women and people of

color living in impoverished circumstances. At 18 percent, the United States now has the highest child poverty rate among the six richest countries in the world. These growing economic disparities led to the finding that "the American Dream is rapidly becoming the American Illusion, as the U.S. now has the lowest rate of social mobility of any of the rich countries."<sup>1</sup>

Democracy cannot flourish in a nation divided into haves and have nots, and education plays a critical role in improving social mobility, carrying the potential to undermine the perpetuation of intergenerational inequality. For this reason, providing educational opportunities for everyone—not just the privileged—is essential for our nation's economy, and more importantly, for our democracy. Nevertheless, access alone is not sufficient. If we are to make strides toward an equity-minded approach to higher education, we need to reject, once and for all, a deficit perspective that focuses on what students are missing, and instead offer evidence-based interventions that target cognitive, noncognitive, and psychosocial factors showcasing students' assets.<sup>2</sup> These strategies must span the curricular

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## 2018–22 STRATEGIC PLAN

# *Educating For Democracy*



and cocurricular and extend throughout the college experience.

Guided by its mission, over the next five years, AAC&U will strive to destabilize the reproduction of social inequality in the academy and foster success for every student, across all types of institutions. Together, we will

1. champion faculty-engaged, evidence-based, sustainable models and strategies for promoting **quality** in undergraduate education;
2. advance **equity** across higher education in service to academic excellence and social justice;
3. lead institutions and communities in articulating and demonstrating the **value** of liberal education for work, life, global citizenship, and democracy; and
4. catalyze reform in higher education to emphasize **discovery and innovation** as fundamental aspects of a liberal education.

In doing so, AAC&U will focus its efforts to advance these strategic objectives through three cross-cutting areas of work:

- **Building Evidence** that supports the development of best practices within the higher education community, promotes faculty-led assessment of student learning, and demonstrates the value of AAC&U's work
- **Expanding Capacity** by enhancing faculty and leadership development, identifying and bringing effective practices to scale, and implementing educational reforms that further the goals of AAC&U and its members
- **Accelerating Advocacy and Outreach** by providing tools and resources that help faculty, academic and student affairs leaders, provosts, and presidents champion AAC&U's mission and communicate broadly the value of an equitable, high-quality liberal education

Each of these goals and cross-cutting areas is grounded in AAC&U's deep and abiding commitment to Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP). Since its inception in 2005,

LEAP's public advocacy and campus action initiatives have promoted the importance of a liberal education for students and for a nation dependent on economic innovation and democratic strength. Responding to contemporary demands for more college-educated

workers and more engaged citizens, LEAP highlights a set of essential learning outcomes that all students should achieve in college.

Looking ahead, the next phase of LEAP will provide leadership and guidance to institutions of higher education regarding evidence-based models and strategies that show promise for meeting key student success challenges while also making certain that such approaches are coupled with, and include, an enduring emphasis on equity and quality. These efforts will embrace and develop faculty and administrative competencies to engage in processes of evidence development and creation regarding emergent practices that specifically address student success, quality in learning, and equity.

Closely aligned with the next generation of LEAP is an expansion of the scope of AAC&U's work on guided pathways for general education and majors (GEMs Pathways). Particular attention

will be paid to supporting student transitions from two-year to four-year institutions, applying high-impact practices in varied learning environments, and building capacity to support the success of every student, including nontraditional-aged students, incarcerated students, students of color, and students of varying socioeconomic status, alongside others who have been marginalized. Founded on the principles and guidelines of equity, proficiency, agency and self-direction, integrative learning and problem-based inquiry, transparency, and assessment, AAC&U's emerging pathways initiatives will promote a more intentional, integrated, and inquiry-centered undergraduate experience.

AAC&U's intensified programming to support integrative learning will include scaling up existing models for stimulating a diverse and competitively trained STEM workforce. Indeed, responses to unscripted global problems, often driven by technological advancements in science, will require new levels of integration across disciplines. Using the STEM faculty professional development models created through Teaching to Increase Diversity and Equity in STEM (TIDES), AAC&U will empower STEM faculty to adopt culturally responsive pedagogies and sustain the necessary changes in practice required for relevant and inclusive STEM teaching. Additionally, by incorporating the use of its STEM Central online platform into dissemination efforts, AAC&U will provide STEM communities of practice with databases of resources focused on improving undergraduate STEM education through a shared knowledge, understanding, and appreciation for the evidence-based undergraduate teaching strategies that can address the national quest for global preeminence in science and technology, established following World War II.

### **The future of work**

At the same time, AAC&U will redouble its efforts to demonstrate a false dichotomy between vocational, or preprofessional, and liberal education. Despite the dominant narrative that one's undergraduate major is all that matters and that only some majors will prepare students for success in the workplace, the evidence from AAC&U's own surveys of employers suggests that this is simply not the case. For instance, data from AAC&U's 2015 survey of employers indicate that more than 90 percent of employers agree that a graduate's "demonstrated capacity

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to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than his or her undergraduate major.”<sup>3</sup> Such skills can be developed in a wide variety of chosen disciplines if the courses are well-designed and if they are integrated within robust, problem-based general education programs. Recognizing and communicating these data is critical at a time when the *Washington Post* has listed higher education as being on 2017’s “Out List,” replacing it with “hire education” on 2018’s “In List.”<sup>4</sup>

The sentiments underpinning the prediction in the *Post* capture many of the elements reflected in the proposal by the chair of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Congresswoman Virginia Foxx, on the Higher Education Reauthorization Act. Entitled *Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity through Education Reform* (PROSPER), the plan calls for an emphasis on apprenticeship models, competency-based programs, and industry-led earn-and-learn initiatives spurred by deregulation that would allow increased outsourcing to non-college providers. Its aim is to partially address widespread concerns that education is too expensive, too difficult to access, and doesn’t teach people twenty-first-century skills. But the risk is that in the steps taken to promote accountability and immediate economic opportunity, long-term equity goals will be sacrificed.

Narrow career and technical training may prepare students for their first jobs, but our changing economy requires graduates who have broad-based skills that are transferable across jobs, including the jobs of the future that have not yet been invented. Therefore, AAC&U will continue to survey employers and other community members regarding the future of work and the knowledge, skills, and abilities that higher education graduates need to strengthen the economy and civic life. By encouraging members to engage with employers, program advisory groups, and other community partners to ensure that students have an opportunity to learn through internships, job shadowing, project creation and implementation, and other high-impact practices that deepen and integrate learning, AAC&U will help demonstrate the value of higher education in a healthy society. This work will address common differences in the language that employers, community groups, and educators use to describe desired skills and abilities and articulate the worth of liberal education as the foundation for graduates’ capacities to

translate their knowledge and abilities into new and emerging jobs and situations, promoting lifelong growth and progress.

### A new VALUE proposition

AAC&U takes seriously the public mandate to prepare students for success in all aspects of their lives, including work. Therefore, discussions about skills versus content, the meaningfulness and usefulness of the pragmatic liberal arts, the primary purpose of education as fostering lifelong learning, and the need to provide our students with opportunities to reflect on why they are being asked to do the work required of them, so they are able to tell a story about how those experiences are transferable, must be placed in conversation with discussions about how we assess students, train and reward future faculty, and demonstrate quality.

One of the most exciting initiatives detailed in *We ASPIRE* involves AAC&U’s partnership with Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research, and our collaboration with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association through the Multi-State Collaborative, to expand the scope and scale of our work on Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE). The VALUE Institute, representing an integrated system for safeguarding quality and equity in student learning, advances assessment based on the work students do through the curriculum and cocurriculum rather than on isolated standardized tests. VALUE responds to the need for direct evidence by assessing the quality of learning across skills and abilities, seeking to demonstrate student achievement of learning outcomes necessary for success in school, employment, and life; to empower faculty to assess student learning based on broadly shared expectations for quality; and to produce actionable evidence to improve teaching and enhance student success.

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### Campuses as politically contested spaces

AAC&U’s new strategic plan was developed with a keen awareness of the ways in which higher education has shifted in the minds of many from being viewed as a public good to being a private commodity. Yet, beyond skepticism regarding the economic value of higher education, there has been a different type of attack on colleges and universities by those who have

come to reject what they regard as a stronghold of leftist, politically correct intellectuals perpetuating a liberal bias. Critics have attributed a new wave of student activism to faculty brainwashing in service to a progressive ideal that promotes civic engagement and globalization while tearing apart the fabric of American society.

The clash of perspectives over social values and the growing divide in the United States received heightened visibility on August 11, 2017, when hundreds of torch-bearing white supremacists descended upon the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, alternately chanting “white lives matter, you will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us.” The siege was a prelude to a “Unite the Right” rally held the following day at Emancipation Park, demonstrating solidarity in opposition to the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. A group of counterprotesters had mobilized in anticipation, and amidst violent clashes, a white supremacist drove his car into a crowd of those gathered to oppose bigotry and hate, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer.

Though many Americans were surprised by these overt demonstrations of white supremacist ideologies in the public square, others pointed

to a new permission structure that has normalized racist extremism. The year was already fraught with controversies over freedom of expression on campuses, as college and university leaders attempted to steer a course between condemning hate speech

and promoting the free exchange of ideas—the very heart of the educational enterprise—while protecting the well-being of everyone in the community. Yet, that bleak night in Charlottesville highlighted for everyone the true extent to which campuses have come to serve as politically contested spaces.

In addition to a highly publicized Pew Research poll indicating a dramatic increase over a two-year period in the number of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who believe that colleges and universities have a negative impact on the country, a 2017 annual University of California–Los Angeles Higher Education Research Survey

found that first-year college students are more politically polarized than they have been in more than half a century. With 35.5 percent identifying as liberal or far left and 22.2 percent as conservative or far right, the increasing ideological identification among first-year college students reflects growing partisan divides.<sup>5</sup> Individuals at either end of this widening political expanse not only disagree about how to respond to matters of racial and social injustice, but on whether inequalities exist in the first place. There is cause for concern, especially given the deleterious effect of partisanship and political polarization on state funding for higher education.

Nevertheless, there is also reason for optimism. Among those entering college, “68.1 percent of conservative students, 82 percent of non-partisan students, and 86.6 percent of liberal students view themselves as tolerant of other people’s beliefs.”<sup>6</sup> This offers the opportunity for higher education to lead the way in fostering dialogue across differences, while simultaneously reaffirming the role that liberal education plays in discerning the truth. The Association of American Colleges and Universities and its members are committed to doing just that.

### **Fostering dialogue across differences**

At the time of the Charlottesville tragedy, AAC&U had already established a goal of creating 150 centers for Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) across the country. Within a week, AAC&U, in partnership with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Newman’s Own Foundation, announced that it had selected ten colleges and universities as funding recipients to serve as models for empowering campus and community stakeholders in uprooting the conscious and unconscious biases that have triggered racial violence and tension in American society. Part of a national, community-based process to engage citizens in racial healing and mobilize efforts to address current inequities grounded in notions of a racial hierarchy, TRHT seeks to transform collective community narratives and broaden the understanding that Americans have of their diverse experiences.

Across the country, the presence of the Black Lives Matter movement in our communities and on our campuses has raised awareness of racial injustice, unveiling the ways in which institutionalized racism in the academy

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often goes unrecognized and sparking calls for a rewriting of the dominant narratives around race. However, the conversation around inclusion at colleges and universities was rapidly expanded and amplified just a week into President Trump's term, when an executive order was issued placing a travel ban to the United States on citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries. Students and scholars were stranded overseas before a federal judge in Washington State successfully challenged the order, citing potential harm to public higher education. Recognizing the increasing importance of questions of religious identity and diversity on the national and global stage, and the underdevelopment of interfaith cooperation as a learning goal and practice on many college campuses, AAC&U has strengthened its partnership with the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) to infuse considerations of religious identity within curricular and cocurricular experiences at colleges and universities.

### Conclusion

AAC&U's 2018–22 strategic plan, *We ASPIRE*, makes explicit our pledge to prepare students for democratic citizenship by championing liberal education, quality, and equity across sectors. In a world in which the American Dream has ostensibly been reduced solely to prosperity, disconnected from the values of democracy and freedom, it is crucial to connect the work being done in the academy with people's lives, sparking interest in mediating pluralism through dialogue and civic understanding.

Indeed, if we hope to bolster the reputation of higher education within democratic society, we need to have a visible impact on the communities in which we live—grappling with real-world problems alongside our neighbors, locally and around the globe. At the same time, in fulfilling the civic mission of higher education, we must infuse civic learning outcomes progressively across all academic disciplines. Above all, responding to the most pressing ethical, legal, and social issues of the day, those of us in higher education must reassert the role that liberal education plays in discerning the truth.

We invite you to engage online with AAC&U's new strategic plan.<sup>7</sup> As always, we look forward to working together toward achieving our shared objectives. □

To respond to this article, email [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org) with the author's name on the subject line.

### NOTES

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7. AAC&U's strategic plan is available online at <https://www.aacu.org/about/strategicplan>.

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