



Association  
of American  
Colleges and  
Universities

## 2018–22 STRATEGIC PLAN

# *Educating For Democracy*

# WE ASPIRE

*Advancing Student Performance through Integration, Research, and Excellence*



The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) began work on its 2018–22 Strategic Plan in July 2016. Throughout the planning process, we identified challenges and opportunities, examined internal and external analyses and reports, and considered forecasts on the future of higher education.

To determine how AAC&U can position itself to best serve our member institutions and the broader higher education community in the years ahead, the association engaged stakeholders and constituents—including AAC&U's staff and Board of Directors; faculty, staff, students, and governing boards at a wide range of colleges and universities; and members of the public—in open conversations about their specific needs and priorities.

In addition, AAC&U conducted a member survey to inform our strategic goals and areas of focus for the next five years. We are grateful to those who participated in the planning process and look forward to working together to achieve our shared objectives.

As part of the process, we reviewed and updated our mission statement to convey the association's values, purpose, and scope within the current societal context and landscape of higher education.

## AAC&U's Mission

*The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities is to advance the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education in service to democracy. (ADOPTED NOVEMBER 2017)*

## The State of the Organization: AAC&U in 2018

AAC&U is recognized nationally and internationally as the leading association dedicated to advancing the quality, vitality, and public standing of liberal education and inclusive excellence in higher education. Founded by 150 college presidents in 1915 as the Association of American Colleges, AAC&U currently represents nearly 1,400 accredited colleges and universities of every type and size. AAC&U's membership comprises large and small, public and private, two-year and four-year, domestic and international, secular and faith-based institutions; tribal colleges, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities; and entire state systems.

The clarity and salience of AAC&U's mission, its centrality to our members' daily lives, the robust and diverse programming the association offers, and our rich tradition of service to all sectors of higher education characterize the organization. Our talented staff supports educators at member colleges and universities across the country and around the world as they work to ensure the fulfillment of the promise of liberal education and the moral imperative of equity in all aspects of higher education.

At the core of AAC&U's high-quality programs, meetings and institutes, public outreach efforts, and campus-based projects is a deep and abiding commitment to liberal education as integral to student success in a rapidly changing, globally interdependent world. Increasingly, college and university graduates are called upon to address multiple interconnected challenges by integrating their knowledge and skills across disciplinary areas—including the sciences, technology, the humanities, the arts, the social sciences, and the professions—in support of discovery and innovation. Thus, student success extends beyond degree completion to encompass students' attainment of broad and in-depth knowledge, the capacity to integrate and apply learning in new circumstances, and the creativity and resilience necessary to address real-world problems.

AAC&U stands at the forefront of the identification of essential learning outcomes; the understanding of employer needs and perceptions; and the development of evidence-based pedagogies, research, and program designs that emphasize the assets all students bring to college rather than their perceived deficits. These programs and initiatives reflect an understanding that access alone is not sufficient to ensure that the advantages of a quality liberal education are available to all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, social identity, or program of study. AAC&U's emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion has established the organization as a national leader in inventing comprehensive assessment initiatives focused on actual student artifacts. Such artifacts include students' *signature work*—projects of at least one semester that integrate and demonstrate a student's learning across general education and the major, bridging the curricular and cocurricular, on topics that matter to the student and to society.

Interwoven with AAC&U's advocacy for liberal education, equity, and inclusion is the call to reclaim higher education's civic mission of educating for democracy—preparing students for work, life, and citizenship in local, national, and global contexts.

## Current Challenges

Among the most urgent challenges facing colleges and universities today are growing economic, racial, and ethnic segregation and an intolerance for difference. Accompanied by a burgeoning loss of public trust, the notion of higher education as a public good has been displaced by a belief that a college education is a private commodity. Calls for a demonstrated return on investment measured solely in terms of employability have intensified. Meanwhile, disinvestments in public higher education, including cuts to the budgets of federal agencies that have provided crucial research funding on college and university campuses, mean that institutions are increasingly doing more with less. These trends threaten to undermine the implementation of educational practices and professional development programs critical to student success at every level and at all types of institutions. The financial constraints facing many of our member institutions put additional pressure on AAC&U to allocate scarce resources wisely, paying enhanced attention to member recruitment, retention, and services, especially in an environment where competition for external funding to support our organizational programming is keen.

In fact, a 2017 survey of AAC&U members reports that institutions' top five concerns are financial constraints, diversity and inclusion, retention and completion, assessment of learning outcomes, and communicating the value of liberal education. Yet efforts to restore public trust in the promise of liberal education and inclusive excellence are hampered by a prevailing national rhetoric that attempts to decouple higher education from the American dream. These attitudes are reflected in a recent poll signaling deep partisan divides concerning higher education's value. The results indicate that a majority of respondents from one of the two dominant political parties regard colleges and universities as having a negative impact on the direction of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Factors influencing this decline in confidence include doubts about higher education as a sure path to socioeconomic mobility and concerns over a liberal bias at colleges and universities—fueled by high-profile controversies related to freedom of expression on campuses—together with rising costs and increases in student debt burdens. Moreover, 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. Despite these challenges, a renewed sense of common purpose and urgency shared across AAC&U's membership reaffirms our foundational values of championing liberal education, equity, and research in service to the public good. Over the next five years, AAC&U will redouble its efforts to safeguard the excellence of the leadership and services we deliver to our member institutions amid pressures on our staff, individually and collectively, to help address the rapidly expanding needs of colleges and universities.

## Aspirations

*AAC&U will promote these values and commitments that underlie its mission:*

- *Serving as the leading resource for expertise, best practices, strategies, and models that advance liberal learning, quality, and equity in higher education*
- *Innovating internally and externally to position AAC&U at the forefront of efforts to identify, frame, and address key issues in higher education*
- *Influencing policies and practices in higher education through exceptional leadership and excellence in programming*
- *Inspiring broad confidence in and commitment to AAC&U's mission*
- *Creating and supporting community across AAC&U's membership, using our expertise to address shared institutional priorities*
- *Demonstrating efficiency and effectiveness through enhanced collaboration, internal communication, and focused work that addresses higher education's most pressing challenges*
- *Partnering with member institutions and broader constituencies in higher education, K–12 education, business, and industry to advance AAC&U's mission*
- *Responding to the diverse needs and challenges facing the AAC&U community, ensuring that individuals and institutions across the higher education spectrum are represented and find value in the association's work*
- *Providing research-based evidence that supports AAC&U's programs and initiatives*

## Strategic Goals

*Guided by its mission, AAC&U will implement the following strategic goals:*

- *Champion faculty-engaged, evidence-based, sustainable models and strategies for promoting **quality** in undergraduate education*
- *Advance **equity** across higher education in service to academic excellence and social justice*
- *Lead institutions and communities in articulating and demonstrating the **value** of liberal education for work, life, global citizenship, and democracy*
- *Catalyze reform in higher education to emphasize **discovery and innovation** as fundamental aspects of a liberal education*

## Cross-Cutting Areas of Work

*AAC&U will focus its efforts to advance the strategic goals 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*



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## Strategic Initiatives



AAC&U serves its members and the higher education community by pursuing strategic programs and practices, grounded in campus-based work, to ensure that the association and our members remain at the forefront of educational reform initiatives that advance liberal education and equity in service to a just democracy. Launched in 2005, Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) is a national public advocacy and campus action initiative that promotes the importance of a liberal education for students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. LEAP responds to contemporary demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens. LEAP serves as a catalyst for colleges and universities aspiring to and working toward both principles of excellence for undergraduate education and a set of essential learning outcomes that all students should achieve in college. The following highlighted strategic initiatives, to be implemented over the next five years, build upon the legacy of LEAP and reflect AAC&U's continuous commitment to liberal education, equity, global learning, and civic engagement.

### Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT)

As a sector partner in the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) effort, AAC&U will guide and support the development of TRHT Campus Centers on college and university campuses around the country, with a goal of creating 150 centers. The first ten centers will serve as models to empower campus and community stakeholders to uproot 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 catalyze efforts to address current inequities grounded in notions of a racial hierarchy, TRHT is an adaptation of some of the most recognized Truth and Reconciliation Commission models. This effort seeks to ensure that the next generation of strategic leaders and critical thinkers is prepared for and focused on dismantling the belief in the hierarchy of human value.

### Education for Democracy and Globally Responsible Citizenship

For a quarter of a century, AAC&U has championed education for democratic engagement and globally responsible citizenship by advocating for student participation in open-minded, perspective-seeking problem solving. The association laid the foundation for integrating civic aims as core practices in higher education through signature initiatives like *American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy, and Liberal Learning*; *Shared Futures: Global Learning and Social Responsibility*; *Core Commitments: Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility*; and the creation and advancement of a national agenda for higher education articulated in the report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Informed by all four initiatives, the next iteration of work will promote intentional designs in majors across all disciplines and in general education capstone courses. These designs will use collaborative, generative civic partnerships and a range of civic pedagogies to prepare democratically engaged citizens skilled at working across differences to collectively solve problems at work and in their local and global communities.

### Fostering STEM Higher Education Reform

Responding to unscripted global problems, often driven by technology and advances in science, will require new levels of integration across disciplines. AAC&U will expand its programming to support integrative learning and scale up existing models for promoting a diverse and competitively trained STEM workforce. 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 aimed at improving undergraduate STEM education through shared knowledge, understanding, and appreciation for the evidence-based undergraduate teaching strategies that can address the nation's quest for global preeminence in science and technology.

## Speaking across Religious Differences

As an inclusive higher education membership organization comprising institutions that reflect the cultural and religious diversity of this nation and the world, AAC&U is uniquely positioned to explore, engage, and collaborate across major world traditions to constructively confront contemporary global challenges and enduring questions. Recognizing the increasing importance of questions of religious identity and diversity on the national and global stage, as well as the underdevelopment of interfaith cooperation as a learning goal and practice on many college campuses, AAC&U will work in partnership with the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) to infuse considerations of religious identity within curricular and cocurricular experiences at colleges and universities to transform the presence of diversity into engaged and productive pluralism.

## Guided Pathways within and across Institutions for Underserved Student Success

Working with a wide range of colleges and universities, AAC&U has facilitated the development of quality student learning pathways that serve as catalysts to increase completion for underserved students. The next phase of this work will focus on strengthening these pathways within and across two-year and four-year institutions and applying them in nontraditional learning environments, building capacity to support the success of all students, including nontraditional students, incarcerated students, students of color, and students of varying socioeconomic status, as well as others who have traditionally been marginalized.

## Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE)

In partnership with Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research and in collaboration with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association's Multi-State Collaborative, AAC&U will expand the scope and scale of the VALUE Institute, representing an integrated system for ensuring quality and equity in student learning. VALUE advances assessment based in the work students do through the curriculum and cocurriculum. It aims 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.

## Advocating for Liberal Education with Systematic Employer Surveys

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 the 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, unscripted, not-yet-created jobs and situations, ensuring lifelong growth and progress.

## Next Generation LEAP Efforts

AAC&U will build upon the foundation provided by LEAP to help higher education address its greatest challenges. To address current and evolving interests in student success outcomes, AAC&U will provide leadership and guidance to higher education regarding evidence-based models and strategies that show promise for meeting key student success challenges while also ensuring that such approaches are coupled with and include an enduring focus on equity and quality. These efforts will embrace the work of faculty and administrators and support their development of the competencies necessary to generate evidence regarding emergent practices that promise to address student success, quality in learning, and equity.

### Note

1. Hannah Fingerhut, "Republicans Skeptical of Colleges' Impact on U.S., but Most See Benefits for Workforce Preparation," *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers*, July 20, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/20/republicans-skeptical-of-colleges-impact-on-u-s-but-most-see-benefits-for-workforce-preparation>.



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