

# Making the Case for Liberal Education



RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

BY DEBRA HUMPHREYS



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of American  
Colleges and  
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LEAP



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1818 R Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009-1604

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ISBN 0-9779210-1-8

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*This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.*

# The Learning Every Student Needs: The Emerging Consensus



*The only education that prepares us for change is a liberal education. In periods of change, narrow specialization condemns us to inflexibility—precisely what we do not need. We need the flexible intellectual tools to be problem solvers, to be able to continue learning over time.*

—David Kearns, former CEO of Xerox Corporation

Behind the scenes, largely unknown to the public and students alike, a consensus is emerging about the kind of education that Americans need to thrive in a knowledge-intensive economy, a globally engaged democracy, and a society where innovation is essential to progress and success. This consensus about essential learning outcomes underscores the value of a liberal education for all college students, regardless of their background or choice of field.

Through its new campaign, Liberal Education and America's Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College (LEAP), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) champions the value of a liberal education and shines a spotlight on what really matters in college—the kinds of learning that will truly empower today's students to succeed and make a difference in the twenty-first century. Through public opinion research and many campus–community dialogues with campus, business, and community leaders, AAC&U staff members have identified a series of common challenges and misunderstandings about liberal education. We have prepared this guide to help campus leaders and faculty members respond persuasively to these challenges as they communicate with students, parents, and other interested members of the public. We also continue to gather resources about the value of liberal education and to share practices designed to ensure that every student gains the benefits of this kind of education.

This publication provides language that can be incorporated into editorials, speeches, presentations, Web sites, and campus brochures and publications. AAC&U is also working intensively with individuals from campuses that are part of the LEAP Campus Action Network as they seek to improve their liberal education offerings and the many ways that they, individually, and their campuses, collectively, communicate about liberal education's value to today's students and our society.

AAC&U has published a companion LEAP publication, *Communicating Commitment to Liberal Education: A Self-Study Guide for Institutions*, that is designed to help campus leaders assess how effectively their institutions are signaling commitment to liberal education. To see how you can get involved with LEAP and to find other LEAP resources, visit our Web site at [www.aacu.org/advocacy](http://www.aacu.org/advocacy).



# What is Liberal Education?

## The LEAP Vision



In the LEAP campaign, AAC&U uses the term “liberal education” to refer to a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and that cultivates social responsibility and a strong sense of ethics and values. A liberal education of this sort is more important than ever in today’s volatile global economy and interconnected world. It therefore should be available to all students, regardless of their backgrounds, what schools they choose to attend, or what major or field of study they pursue.

As colleges respond to twenty-first-century challenges, they are developing and implementing a new vision for liberal education that involves rigorous intellectual encounters with important contemporary problems as well as enduring human challenges. Today’s liberal education also usually includes a general education curriculum that provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and ways of knowing at both introductory and more advanced levels. In addition to what they learn through their general education requirements, students are also developing liberal education skills and knowledge through in-depth study in a major—including in many professional majors—and in capstone experiences and assignments.

Whatever specific curricular form it takes, today’s liberal education advances an essential set of learning outcomes essential for success in today’s world. These outcomes include the following:

### **KNOWLEDGE of Human Cultures and the Natural and Physical World**

- grounded in study of the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
- focused through engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

### **INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL SKILLS**

- inquiry, critical and creative thinking
- written and oral communication
- quantitative literacy
- information literacy
- teamwork and problem solving

### **INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES**

- civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- intercultural knowledge and competence
- ethical reasoning and action
- foundations and skills for lifelong learning

### **INTEGRATIVE LEARNING**

- synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
- the demonstrated capacity to adapt knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and questions

# Common Challenges and Misunderstandings: What Research Reveals

In 2005 and 2006, AAC&U commissioned a series of focus groups in different regions of the country with college-bound high school students, advanced college students, and private employers. Through this research, AAC&U discovered some of the most common misunderstandings about liberal education and tested language that persuasively dispels these misunderstandings and responds to common challenges to liberal education.<sup>1</sup>

None of the high school students and few of the college students with whom we spoke had ever heard the term “liberal education.” The students voiced a broad array of associations with the term, however. Some associated it only with liberal arts colleges, while others associated it with broad exposure to and knowledge of various fields of study and viewpoints, with the complete freedom to choose what one studies, or with an education that is politically aligned with the left. Some students linked the term to the arts and humanities rather than the sciences, drawing upon their familiarity with the term “liberal arts.”

AAC&U’s focus groups showed that, in general, students have only vague associations with the term “liberal education,” but are open to more substantive definitions. We found that the association of liberal education with liberal or left-leaning politics isn’t as widespread among students as might be imagined. We also found that students associate the term with the general education component of a liberal education rather than with a set of essential capacities developed across both general education and students’ majors. Finally, a definition of liberal education like the one on page 3 appeals to most students, especially to high school students. College students also embrace the *concept* of a liberal education, but are more skeptical about it because of their own disappointing experiences with fulfilling general education requirements at their institutions.

While some private employers with whom we spoke recalled hearing the term “liberal education,” discussions with them reveal that they, too, lack a clear understanding either of liberal education’s history or of the contemporary practices that define it. Like the students, many of these individuals



associate liberal education only with the humanities or the arts or with liberal arts colleges alone. A few associate it with a politically left-leaning education. Many of them believe that it does not include the study of scientific, technical, or business-related disciplines.

We also found that many private employers believe that a liberal education is a less rigorous and less focused approach to education that does not effectively prepare students to contribute to today's economy. This is the opposite of what one generally hears from CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Some CEOs use the term liberal education and some do not. But nearly all of them will forcefully make the case for the importance of the outcomes detailed on page 3, which comprise the outcomes provided by the best of today's liberal education. The private employers with whom we spoke were not CEOs of major corporations. When they expressed skepticism about the value of a liberal education, they did so primarily because they focused only on the general education element of a college education. As with the students, however, these business leaders respond favorably to a *contemporary* definition of liberal education like the one on page 3. The findings from these focus groups reveal, however, the importance of clearly explaining the connection between educational aims and outcomes introduced in a broad general education and the further development of these outcomes in students' work in their majors.

Whether they understand the term well or not, business executives seek to hire graduates who have received a broad education as well as at least some specific job or technical skills and real-world experience. They understand well the broad array of learning outcomes that are essential for success in today's volatile global economy. For this reason, it is essential when making the case for a liberal education to focus on the ways that liberal education outcomes are critical to success in the workplace of the future and to the functioning of American society and its economy.

'AAC&U commissioned Peter D. Hart Research to conduct six focus groups of high school and college students in July and August 2004 and two additional focus groups, one with high school students and one with college students, in March 2005. The groups were held in Indianapolis, Indiana; Portland, Oregon; Alexandria, Virginia; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Of these eight focus groups, four were conducted with rising public high school seniors who planned to attend a four-year college or university and four were conducted with rising juniors and seniors at public and private colleges and universities. In January 2006, AAC&U commissioned Peter D. Hart Research to conduct three additional focus groups with business executives—one each in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Atlanta, Georgia; and Fairfax, Virginia.

## Challenge 1

Liberal education might be good in theory, but it is just not practical or relevant in today's world. With so many students pursuing a college degree, and with such limited personal and state and federal government budgets, isn't this form of education a luxury rather than a necessity?

## Response

Our nation's economic competitiveness depends on today's college students achieving a much more complex set of skills and capacities than was required in earlier years. Investing in liberal education will pay off for individual students and for the nation as a whole. For individual students, focusing on long-term professional goals rather than the starting salary they might receive in their first job is essential to their own success. It is far more important for students to develop transferable skills and capacities than to choose a "hot" major in a field that will quickly either "cool" or be replaced by other priority fields. For the nation as a whole, having a workforce that is able to respond to changing economic demands is also essential. Liberal education prepares students to understand the implications of our current global interdependence and to grasp complex problems and find innovative solutions. At a time when the United States faces growing international competition, these skills can give our country an economic edge.

## Challenge 2

Liberal education seems less practical than a more focused professional education—like engineering, nursing, or business. Don't these professional majors better prepare students for today's well-paid jobs?

## Response

All students—whether they choose to major in a professional field like engineering or nursing, or in a traditional liberal arts and sciences field like history or sociology or chemistry—need the knowledge, skills, and capacities developed by a liberal education. Today's students are likely to change jobs and even careers several times over the course of their lives. If they pursue too narrow an undergraduate education, they will be unprepared for dealing with change—the predominant characteristic of today's economy and tomorrow's jobs.

A liberal education will provide college graduates durable and transferable skills that will equip them to succeed over the long term in a volatile global economy. Colleges and universities are reinventing liberal education to meet twenty-first-century challenges and students no longer have to choose between a professional or vocational field and a liberal education.

Today's employers desire employees who have the broad general skills developed through a liberal education as well as some experience applying those skills in real-world settings. This means that students majoring in history will be better prepared for today's jobs if they are required to do internships or projects that require them to apply what they are learning in real-world settings. It also means, however, that those pursuing professional fields must develop broad general knowledge and advanced analytic and communication skills.



## Challenge 3

Liberal education seems to be the kind of education where students are taught that there are no right or wrong answers or are taught only a politically “liberal” point of view. Doesn’t this kind of education provide students with a narrow and “politically correct” education that doesn’t reflect the values of most Americans?

## Response

A liberal education introduces students to multiple perspectives and develops their own independent critical judgment. Liberal education doesn’t tell students what to think; it exposes them to a wide array of ideas and teaches them how to evaluate those ideas. One of the reasons why a liberal education is so valuable is that it compels students to think and perform challenging intellectual tasks, sometimes outside their own comfort zones. It introduces them to new perspectives and often leads them to question their preexisting ideas and beliefs. This is precisely why it is an ideal education to prepare students to function in a diverse and rapidly changing work environment. It produces 360-degree thinkers. With its emphasis on breadth of knowledge and sophisticated habits of mind, liberal education is the best and most powerful way to build students’ capacities to form reasoned judgments about complex issues.

## Challenge 4

Liberal education may be appropriate for some students, but it isn’t for everyone. All students do not need this kind of education to succeed in today’s world. If we steer all students toward a liberal education, won’t we face a shortage of manual laborers?

## Response

The economic data are clear. The workplace and the nature of today’s jobs are changing rapidly. The technical skills needed on the job will be obsolete very quickly. Narrow technical skills have a much shorter shelf life than broader skills and capacities. The fields that are growing fastest in today’s economy are fields that require college-level skills. Economists predict, in fact, that America will face a shortage of college-educated workers in the coming years. While there will always be a need for manual laborers, even manufacturing and lower-level technical jobs today require a higher skill level than in years past. The jobs of the future that will provide today’s students with the most economic security require college-level learning—and the skills and capacities a liberal education provides.

## Challenge 5

Today's world of work is dominated by computers and other forms of sophisticated technology. Wouldn't it be smarter to focus on providing students with a more relevant technical education rather than a liberal education?

## Response

Today's employers know that they will need to continuously upgrade the technical skills of their workers as technology changes. They are far more likely to express concerns about the broader general skills of their new employees. For example, employers are more concerned about the lack of problem-solving skills and verbal and written communication skills among their new employees. They want all their employees to have these skills, whether they are working in highly technical fields or not. They are also particularly concerned about the ability of their employees to work effectively in teams and with clients and customers from a variety of backgrounds. A liberal education is the best way to develop these capacities.

## Challenge 6

Liberal education is a less focused and a less rigorous form of education. Doesn't it provide an easy route to a college degree, but not the specific skills students need to succeed?

## Response

The tradition of liberal education has set the standard of excellence for American higher education since the country's beginnings. The most selective and prestigious colleges in the country offer their students a rigorous liberal education to prepare them for pursuing advanced degrees and successful careers in a variety of professions. A liberal arts and sciences field of study isn't inherently "easier" than a professional major—and all students, whatever they major in, need the skills and capacities that a liberal education provides. Rather than focusing on choosing the "right" major as an undergraduate, today's students need to focus on the broad knowledge and skills provided by a liberal education. They can and should be challenged to achieve at high levels by their undergraduate course of study, whatever major they choose.



## Challenge 7

Doesn't liberal education focus only on the arts and humanities? Aren't science and technology fields more important in today's world?

## Response

The tradition of liberal education has always included the sciences. Increasingly, technology is also being incorporated across the curriculum and in every student's course of study, whatever the student's major. While science and technology are important in today's world, the broad array of skills and knowledge developed through a liberal education will best prepare all students for a volatile global economy. The jobs that today's students will have in ten years may not even exist yet. In order to succeed in a complex work environment, all students need the skills and capacities that a liberal education provides—and these include the communication skills, the creative and critical thinking skills, and the cultural literacy developed through the arts and humanities.

## Challenge 8

The kind of liberal education you are advocating cannot be obtained in the few years most students spend pursuing a BA degree. The wide array of skills and capacities and the breadth of knowledge you say students need requires far more time to obtain.

## Response

This is absolutely true. The broad knowledge and skills that a liberal education provides and the sense of responsibility that it fosters must, indeed, be developed from kindergarten through college and beyond. Elementary and secondary school teachers must work together with college faculty to develop a seamless curriculum that introduces and then develops and reinforces broad knowledge and essential skills. The skills and knowledge provided by a liberal education also must be developed for all college students in more than just the courses they take to satisfy their "general education" requirements. They must be further deepened and developed in a student's major. At all levels of education, students must be taught more than just isolated facts and figures or narrow technical skills. They must learn the habits of mind that will allow them to continue learning over the course of their lifetimes. They must have opportunities to apply what they are learning in new situations, so that when they encounter changing circumstances on the job or in their lives, they will be well equipped to respond effectively to changing circumstances. Today's economy demands that all workers develop a lifelong learning ethos.

## About the Author

Debra Humphreys is vice president for communications and public affairs at the Association of American Colleges and Universities. She is a member of the leadership team coordinating public affairs activities of the Liberal Education and America's Promise campaign. Humphreys has served in her current role at AAC&U since 2001. Before that time, she served for seven years as director of programs in AAC&U's Office of Equity, Diversity, and Global Initiatives, where she directed projects on diversity in the curriculum, launched and edited *Diversity Digest*, and worked on the Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Initiative Public Information Project. Humphreys holds a BA in art history from Williams College and an MA and PhD in English language and literature from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She has experience teaching film studies, English literature and composition, and women's studies at several colleges and universities in Maryland and New Jersey.



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AAC&U IS THE LEADING NATIONAL ASSOCIATION concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,100 accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U FUNCTIONS AS A CATALYST AND FACILITATOR, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

INFORMATION ABOUT AAC&U MEMBERSHIP, PROGRAMS, AND PUBLICATIONS  
CAN BE FOUND AT [WWW.AACU.ORG](http://WWW.AACU.ORG).

The LEAP logo features the word "LEAP" in a bold, serif font. To the right of the word is a five-pointed star with a gradient from light to dark brown.

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