

## **Our Students' Best Work An Educational Accountability Framework Worthy of Our Mission**

### **A Draft AAC&U Statement with Recommendations for Campuses**

***NOTE: AAC&U actively welcomes member comment both on the desirability of an AAC&U statement on Educational Accountability and on the specific direction taken in this draft statement.***

Calls for higher education to become more accountable have been increasing in frequency and fervor. There are widely differing views about the ultimate goal of such calls. For some, the most important issue is providing individual students with accurate assessments of their own learning and certifying their qualifications at the point of graduation. Many in the academy want to make accountability a catalyst for needed improvements in teaching, learning and curriculum. For others, accountability means providing comparative scorecards on institutional quality.

**Many of the latest accountability proposals, however, have one feature in common. Frequently, they regard scores on standardized tests as the ultimate evidence of student learning and, therefore, as the key to any new system of accountability in higher education.**

As a national organization concerned with the quality and depth of student learning in college, AAC&U believes this equation of accountability with testing is misguided. If we assess student achievement in simplistic or reductionist ways, we run the danger of subverting the potential power of higher learning. Most of the current proposals for testing college students in the name of accountability pose this danger.

This does not mean educators and educational institutions should be exempt from accountability. Rather, accountability for the highest standards of learning calls for new forms of critical inquiry and reflective practice—forms that are both appropriate to higher education's mission and feasible in the contemporary academy.

Education is a complex process. While it is possible to envision standardized tests that illuminate the sophisticated levels of understanding and accomplishment appropriate to *higher* education, we do not yet have such tests. The mass testing industry is oriented toward the broad survey rather than probes of advanced accomplishment, and toward the single correct answer rather than assessment of students' abilities to apply their learning to unscripted problems that defy easy answers.

These limitations in mass testing have already become apparent in the new wave of high stakes school tests, according to researchers who are monitoring public school reform. Touted as catalysts for higher standards as well as greater accountability, the high stakes tests adopted in the fifty states tend to shortchange such important outcomes as critical thinking, extended analysis, and writing. The problems with mass testing would become even more crippling in the

context of higher education where students do their most advanced work in hundreds of different academic fields and combinations of fields.

The mounting interest in new performance standards challenges higher education to demonstrate courage and creativity. With courage, we can insist on forms of accountability that attend to complexity and context, rather than the deceptive clarity of 3-digit data points. With creativity, we can develop a new concept of educational accountability: one that respects the rich diversity of fields embraced in the twenty-first century academy and one that focuses on students advanced accomplishment—their best work—rather than standardized tests.

Recognizing an urgent need for new directions and hopeful of creating a more nuanced dialogue about these important questions, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has prepared the following statement on educational accountability.

This statement proposes that students' own active performances—assessed for student progress in achieving important aims of education from the first to final year of college—provide the best evidence of the quality of their learning and therefore the best framework for educational accountability.

## **I. The Aims of Liberal Education as a Framework for Accountability**

AAC&U is committed to ensuring that every student experiences the benefits—intellectual, economic, civic, ethical, and intercultural—of a well-designed and intellectually challenging liberal education. Given this commitment, AAC&U holds that new frameworks for educational accountability should focus on students' level of achievement in college outcomes that characterize a liberal education. The Association has summarized these outcomes and their significance in its comprehensive 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. In brief, they include:

### **Strong analytical, communication, quantitative, technological and practical skills--**

achieved and demonstrated through successful studies in a range of different fields and settings, and through advanced achievement in at least one major field of study;

### **Deep understanding of disciplines that explore the natural, social and cultural realms--**

achieved and demonstrated through studies that build conceptual knowledge and that engage learners with modes of inquiry basic to the sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities;

### **Well-developed intercultural knowledge and collaborative skills--**

acquired and demonstrated through forms of learning that prepare students for both work and democratic citizenship, and that teach them how to engage constructively with a broad range of experiences, human cultures, beliefs and contributions;

### **An examined framework of individual, civic and social responsibilities--**

acquired and demonstrated through forms of learning that connect knowledge, skills, values and public action, and through careful consideration of their own roles and responsibilities in those public and civic contexts;

**A demonstrated ability to take responsibility for advanced and integrative learning--** achieved through research and/or creative projects in which students themselves take primary responsibility for framing significant questions, organizing an analysis, and producing a work of substantial complexity and quality.

These outcomes are valuable because they prepare students to bring knowledge, experience and reflective judgment to the daunting complexity of the contemporary world. Liberal education achieves this by immersing college students in the study of issues that are challenging, multifaceted and often vigorously contested. It teaches students to find and evaluate evidence and to take into account both context and competing perspectives as they form judgments about significant questions. It helps them develop both a respect for the value of human diversity and a set of internal values that serve as a compass in an era of accelerating change.

Liberal education is the best education for success in a dynamic economy fueled by sophisticated knowledge and skills. The opposite of liberal education is narrow or situation-specific training. While situation-specific training has many good uses, it is by itself insufficient preparation for a world characterized by complexity, conflicting judgments, and accelerating change. Even students in technical fields, therefore, need and deserve the complementary benefits of a liberal education to help them make sense of the social and environmental contexts in which they will use their skills, and to prepare for the long term, and not just an initial job.

## **II. Accountability and Context**

AAC&U has provided several contemporary descriptions of liberal education, including its 1998 Board of Directors Statement on Liberal Learning and, most recently, its comprehensive 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*.

Collectively, these frameworks assert three broad principles, to which we now add a fourth:

- 1) Liberal education is not confined to particular fields of study, or to a general education program alone, but is a way of learning equally relevant to all forms of higher education, to all academic fields, and to all students;
- 2) There are many ways of fostering liberal education outcomes for today's diverse students; the association does not endorse a "one-size-fits-all" approach to the college curriculum;
- 3) College education should help all students achieve the full array of liberal education outcomes described above, whatever their particular areas of study or major field(s). *However,*
- 4) These liberal education outcomes will reach their highest level of cultivation in the context of the students' area of specialization or major field(s), where advanced achievement appropriately takes different forms.

In other words, even though the outcomes characteristic of liberal education can be described

generally, as we do above, **these outcomes must be cultivated and assessed in context.** Analytical skill, for example, will have one kind of applied meaning for an English major, and a quite different kind of applied meaning for an engineer. Similarly, the civic, ethical or intercultural questions faced by a student preparing for teaching are likely to take very different forms from those encountered by a student studying economics or biology.

These insights point toward a curricular strategy for educational accountability, rather than a reliance on standardized and/or generic testing. As AAC&U's *Greater Expectations* report attests, the broad aims of liberal learning should be addressed throughout the entire educational experience. Whatever the field of study, therefore, a student's progress in achieving these aims ought to be assessed periodically from the initial to the final year, and in both general education and the chosen major field(s).

Within the college or university context, a comprehensive accountability framework should include:

- 1) Feedback to the student during the first year about the institution's expectations for important liberal learning outcomes, and a diagnostic assessment of each student's demonstrated accomplishment and expected further progress in relation to these outcomes;
- 2) A plan of study, constructed with the student's advisor, that transparently connects the expected outcomes to the student's choice of courses and major field(s);
- 3) Milestone assessments in both general education and the major field that are tied to key outcomes, with timely feedback to the student and his or her advisor;
- 4) Capstone or culminating experiences in the major field(s) in which the student actively demonstrates and is assessed for his or her cumulative accomplishments in liberal education.

Both milestone and capstone assessments can be embedded in the regular curriculum, through institution and field-appropriate combinations of designated courses, qualifying assignments in the major(s), internships and field-based learning, and culminating courses, projects, research papers and/or portfolios.

An important foundation for this approach to accountability has already been laid in the majority of college and university campuses. The National Assessment of Student Engagement (NSSE) reports that 58% of college seniors currently are expected to complete a capstone or culminating experience of some kind. Typically, capstones are completed in the student's major field although some institutions require capstone experiences in general education as well. Many other institutions and programs already require students to compile portfolios of their work as a requirement for graduation. Experiments are underway across the country to put such portfolios online.

Capstone projects and portfolios provide promising anchors for a meaningful approach to educational accountability. They provide contexts in which student work can be assessed for

the cross-cutting outcomes of liberal education described above as well as for conceptual knowledge and skills appropriate to the students' selected major(s). In some cases, assignments for portfolios and capstones may need redesign to encompass the full array of important liberal education outcomes. In others, the primary change needed will be a fuller reading of the available evidence on students' development of important liberal education outcomes.

In the last section of this document, we make specific recommendations about ways that assessments grounded in the curriculum can provide useful knowledge to the public (as well as the academy) about an institution's goals, standards, accountability practices, and the quality of student learning outcomes. We also strongly recommend that each campus take steps to engage faculty in interpreting the meaning of assessment outcomes and in using the findings as a catalyst for needed changes in the academic programs.

### **III. False Accountability, or, The Mismeasures of Learning**

Because liberal education seeks to cultivate higher order capabilities, knowledge, judgment, and responsibility, AAC&U strongly cautions against current proposals to determine how well students are learning in college by assessing basic literacies—such as reading, writing or mathematics—that should be the responsibility and province of pre-collegiate education. (We do, however, endorse the assessment of such literacies at entrance, in order to determine whether students need additional preparation to succeed in college-level courses.)

AAC&U also cautions against accountability designs that rely solely on tracking of persistence and graduation rates, and/or student opinion surveys. While these indicators of student progress are informative, they cannot by themselves serve as indicators of students' educational accomplishments or of institutional effectiveness. In fact, there is a danger that the use of graduation rates as an index of effectiveness may lead campuses to lower their standards.

AAC&U is skeptical about current proposals to develop generic tests of college students' problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking skills without attention to the very different domains of knowledge and practice in which students acquire and use their most advanced cognitive and practical skills. Generic testing will provide the false comfort of comparable test scores. But such scores will tell us very little about the quality of different students' level of accomplishment in major fields of study that are, necessarily and desirably, highly differentiated from one another. Nor will generic tests provide good evidence about students' readiness to succeed in the myriad different fields they actually pursue following graduation. Professional fields such as law and medicine do not test educational qualifications with the same generic test, and undergraduate institutions should not do so either.

Conversely, we perceive considerable promise in tests now being developed that give students a small library of new materials related to a problem in a particular domain (e.g., science) and ask them both to assess the quality of the evidence and to write complex answers to questions based on the evidence (taking into account its limitations). Measures such as these come significantly closer to life's real challenges and therefore are more appropriate as assessments of liberal education. Such measures cannot serve as proxies for students' overall

accomplishment in their specific majors. But they can complement discipline-centered assessments by providing evidence of students' abilities to apply both knowledge and analytical skills in domains of learning such as the sciences, social sciences, humanities and arts.

#### **IV. Recommendations for a New Accountability Framework**

Drawing from AAC&U's *Greater Expectations* initiative and from promising practices burgeoning on many campuses, we make the following recommendations to help create a new era of accomplishment and educational accountability on college and university campuses.

##### **1. Make Liberal Education the New Standard of Excellence for All Students**

Given the opportunities and challenges students will face in their personal and professional lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, liberal education should become the new standard of excellence for all students in higher education. The categories of liberal education outcomes important for all students are noted briefly in Part I above, and described more extensively in *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. These outcomes are important indicators of what students need to accomplish as citizens, as participants in a particular field or profession, and as thoughtful, creative, responsible human beings.

##### **2. Articulate Locally Owned Goals for Student Learning Outcomes**

Widely shared clarity about essential learning outcomes for all students is the foundation of any educational accountability framework. For higher education to be accountable for liberal education outcomes, systems and individual institutions must translate these outcomes into goals and language that are meaningful in local contexts. Goals for student accomplishment should be developed and articulated in dialogues that include both faculty members and members of the wider community. To meet the highest standards of excellence, campus (and/or system) goals for student learning should be challenging, public, and evaluated. We also strongly recommend that educational goals address *the full range of liberal education outcomes* rather than focusing on only one or two sets of capabilities such as writing or quantitative reasoning (see **part I** above).

##### **3. Develop Clear and Complementary Responsibilities between General Education and Departmental Programs for the Full Range of Liberal Education Outcomes**

##### **4. Charge Departments to Take Responsibility for the Level and Quality of Students' Most Advanced Work**

Once goals for student learning have been articulated at the campus level (and, in public higher education, at a systems level), they should be translated into program-specific goals for student accomplishment. Goals should be set for general education in ways that respect an individual campus program's particular aims, design, and character. In addition, student learning goals should be articulated within the context of academic majors. For example, while the campus as a whole may hold all students accountable for analysis, communication and intercultural knowledge, these expectations will and should have different implications for specific departments and programs. Each department should translate campus-wide goals for liberal

education into goals appropriate to the field. Departments should also articulate field-specific goals for their majors. Each department should communicate how and why these standards contribute to effective accomplishment in that field.

Once goals are set and clearly communicated, departments and programs should establish proficiency standards for students' most advanced performances that are clear, public, and challenging, to be used by both faculty and students in their educational planning.

Students should receive periodic feedback on their level of achievement in relation to these clearly articulated learning goals and proficiency standards. No student should learn for the first time about shortfalls in meeting proficiency standards at the point of graduation.

### **5. Create Milestone Assessments Across the Curriculum**

Assessments of student progress in achieving goals should be built into the ongoing curriculum and embedded in designated courses and/or assignments, including both general education courses and courses/assignments in departmental majors. Assessment of student progress over time requires that campuses distinguish between entry-level, intermediate, and advanced proficiency in relation to specific goals. Students should be taught to gauge their progress against high expectations for their most advanced work.

### **6. Set Clear Expectations for Culminating Work Performed at a High Level of Accomplishment**

Each department should identify culminating performances and expected proficiency standards—encompassing liberal education outcomes and goals—that will both cultivate advanced knowledge and skill and demonstrate a student's cumulative achievement and learning. These may include research projects, supervised internships, capstone courses, public performances, licensure or other validated tests in one's field, and/or cumulative portfolios providing examples of student achievement in relation to specific goals.

### **7. Provide Periodic External Review and Validation of Assessment Practices and Standards**

There should be periodic evaluation by external reviewers of the goals, the proficiency standards, and work samples submitted by students to meet proficiency standards. Such external reviews provide validation of both the goals and the proficiency standards. A representative sample of student performances in different fields will provide sufficient evidence for external feedback.

Colleges, universities, systems, and states may also publish comparative success rates on standardized tests in specific fields and domains (e.g., teacher licensure exams; tests of general learning in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, etc.) as one among many indicators of campus accomplishment.

### **8. Make Assessment Findings Part of a Campus-wide Commitment to Faculty Inquiry and Educational Improvement**

Accountability efforts should be part of a continuous engagement with the quality of students' actual achievement in relation to important educational goals. Each campus and department should review the quality and level of students' best work, and seek ways to ensure that the curriculum provides repeated opportunities to practice and achieve expected forms of learning. Campus reward systems should address the importance of faculty members' intellectual leadership in both assessment and educational improvement.

## **9. Provide Public Accountability and Transparency**

Each college and university should make public on its Web site:

- A. General and departmental goals for student learning;
- B. Proficiency expectations for rating levels of student achievement in relation to these goals;
- C. A description of the kinds and range of performances that are used in assessing student progress (with a link to different programs and departments); and
- D. A report on student achievement levels (e.g., basic, proficient, advanced) in relation to each goal.

For purposes of publicity and comparison, a campus may translate department-specific assessments back into general categories (e.g., 75% of the students in the college of arts and sciences met a proficient standard for analytical skill and complex problem-solving). The institution should also make public its procedures for reviewing and validating assessment practices, standards and findings.

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