



From Pockets of Excellence to an Integrated Coherent Narrative: LEAP Wisconsin at the Midpoint

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As 2011 begins, the University of Wisconsin (UW) System is just past the halfway point of its participation in Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP). LEAP was announced in January 2005, the same month the UW System agreed to be the pilot system partner. The UW System took pride in its pilot partner status and we touted that designation loudly among our institutions, board of regents, and other policy leaders throughout the state. But at the AAC&U annual meeting in January 2006, one year into the campaign, AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider quite pointedly (albeit nicely) informed me that being the pilot partner wasn't just a title; we were, in fact, expected to deliver. And the message she gave me that January day was inspiring, direct, and, okay, a bit intimidating.

I'd like to use the platform of this issue of *Peer Review* to ask two questions that I hope will be helpful to AAC&U's members, both institutions and individuals, in particular as AAC&U increases the number of states and individual institutions participating in the LEAP initiative with which it is partnering. First, where are we as a system, and what have we accomplished at the end of the first phase of what we now call LEAP Wisconsin? And, second, what are some of the critical factors that need to be in place for this work to succeed at the state system level, to ensure that the *promise* of LEAP is fulfilled?

PHASE I: LOOKING BACK

In 2003, we convened a System Advisory Group on the Liberal Arts (SAGLA). SAGLA was formed to help launch an initiative named The Currency of the Liberal Arts and Sciences: Rethinking Liberal Education in Wisconsin. The Currency Initiative and SAGLA were the work and network that caught

the eye of AAC&U and became LEAP Wisconsin. SAGLA involved both a top-down and bottom-up collaboration among system administrators, and deans, faculty, and other staff from, originally, every UW institution. Above all, the group seemed to meet a need in the UW System: to change the conversation about student success and what universities in the twenty-first century are all about, through intentional, direct discussion and naming of the value and purpose of liberal education.

The conversation began to take hold through a variety of activities and initiatives in the form of both Campus Action and Public Advocacy and Outreach, the avenues for moving LEAP forward proposed by AAC&U. This allowed the work to expand both through and beyond SAGLA, and for leadership to take place at many levels, from faculty and student affairs personnel, to deans, provosts, and chancellors, to System executive leadership, to members of the board of regents, and, because of the unusual public figure who occupied the office, to Wisconsin's now-former Lieutenant Governor, Barbara Lawton.

Six years later, the UW System and institutions have convened scores of discussions, meetings, forums, and conferences focused on LEAP and the role of public higher education—in Wisconsin and beyond—in the twenty-first century. LEAP is a shared conversation throughout the UW System and in all parts of Wisconsin. A partial account of these activities can be found at <http://liberaleducation.uwsa.edu/index.htm>.

Every UW campus is looking at how to redesign curricula around some version of the LEAP essential learning outcomes, and dozens of events have been offered to faculty and staff providing professional development workshops focused on some aspect of LEAP. While there is nobody at the UW System or any of its fifteen institutions who has sole responsibility for working

on LEAP, nor a LEAP-dedicated budget line, the system and many institutions have identified and contributed human and financial resources to advancing the work. Indeed, the dedication of resources to this work has grown considerably, and during a time when the state's investment in public higher education has diminished significantly.

Five years out, we have moved from identifying what might be called institutional pockets of excellence that promote the essential learning outcomes to Wisconsin students and citizens, to building productive communities of practice, advancing the LEAP agenda intentionally, system-wide, and from multiple vantage points. In many circles, LEAP has become the coin of the realm, the *lingua franca* for what higher education in the UW System should be and offer to the residents of the state and beyond. Yet, for all the time, dedication, and creativity that the Phase I work involved—by hundreds of UW System faculty and staff—it turns out that developing shared language and widespread communities of practice was the easy part.

THE REAL GOAL: SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

Indeed, the midpoint evaluation of our LEAP Wisconsin work asks us to reexamine the question at the root of all our efforts: why are we doing this work? It's easy to marginalize that question, especially in the excitement of ratcheting up activities and generating buy-in to LEAP Wisconsin among the UW System's institutions. The answer is that LEAP is the means to an end—the end being the goal of full participation by America's populace in quality higher education and all that it has to offer, both as a private good for individuals and a public good vital to American civil society and democracy. LEAP helps us ensure that student access and success remain critical measures for

how we gauge progress. Perhaps most importantly, the UW System's participation in LEAP helps ensure that quality and high expectations are a part of every conversation we have on what really matters in college. This last point has become both more challenging and more critical amid the country's economic recession, in general, and Wisconsin's dismal budgetary and changing political environments, in particular.

The answer is also that LEAP—nationally and in Wisconsin—has always

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been about *systemic transformation*, not just piecemeal change. Pockets of excellence are important; communities of practice still more so as they build capacity and scale up the impact. But the real goal is deep, abiding, structural change. Only then can the goal of full participation in quality higher education—what we call inclusive excellence—be realized. So the UW System's challenge as we enter the second phase of LEAP Wisconsin is to transform the shared language into shared practice, institution- and system-wide, to reach more and more of the students we have and want to enroll (especially those from groups whom we have traditionally left behind), and to provide evidence of that transformation in our students' learning and success.

As 2011 begins, we see signs that the work of LEAP Wisconsin has started

to transform institutions and the entire system, becoming—in some cases—a part of the infrastructure. To mention a few institutional examples: UW–Oshkosh is engaged in ground-breaking, institution-wide liberal education reform led by its chancellor and provost and adopted by its faculty. LEAP at UW–Madison has taken hold in departments, colleges, and student affairs units in ways remarkable for a large, research-intensive university. UW–Whitewater has embarked on an ambitious project, including provost-

underwritten stipends for participants, to make the institution-wide adoption of the LEAP outcomes meaningful throughout all academic and student affairs units.

PUTTING INITIATIVES IN DIALOGUE WITH ONE ANOTHER

As LEAP Wisconsin has progressed, it has become integrated into other large initiatives in the UW System. In 2006, UW System President Kevin Reilly launched the Growth Agenda for Wisconsin, a strategic framework to guide the UW System in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Developed with broad input from constituents throughout the state, the Growth Agenda offers a vision for developing the state's human potential, creating new jobs, and strengthening communities. It calls for a series of actions that will educate more of Wisconsin's population



for life and work in the twenty-first century. Inspired by AAC&U, its first action step was to develop five shared learning goals, modeled on the essential learning outcomes and representing the system's commitment to prepare students to be competent citizens in a knowledge-based, global society.

Another component of the Growth Agenda is *inclusive excellence*, the UW System's emerging strategic framework for its engagement with diversity and equity. Inclusive excellence entails a dual focus on building greater structural diversity and improving the learning environment and institutional culture; comprehensive institutional engagement and commitment; close attentiveness to the student experience; and the joint pursuit of equity and excellence. It is a process, a philosophy, and an end goal, and, after decades of diversity initiatives in the UW System that have failed to yield significant change, many of us at the UW System believe that inclusive excellence has the potential to succeed—finally—in changing business as usual. Again, AAC&U's leadership in providing theoretical and practical guidance on making excellence inclusive has been critical.

Also critical to our embrace of inclusive excellence has been the system's investment in the Equity Scorecard, an action inquiry process developed by Estela Mara Bensimon at the University of Southern California. The Equity Scorecard is a data sense-making tool, a cultural practice, a leadership approach, and a theory of change. The UW System's institutions have conducted or are conducting fine-grained analysis of student data, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, to determine equitable practice in terms of access, enrollment, retention, and completion. The process develops goals and benchmarks towards the achievement of equitable outcomes for students of color. More than any other initiative in

which we have been involved, the Equity Scorecard has helped us learn that transformation cannot be achieved without inquiry and practice informed by *disaggregated* data. It has also led us towards overcoming the inclination to blame the student as the problem to be fixed, and to instill equity—not just in access but also in retention and completion—as the gold standard for measuring student success.

Central to the Growth Agenda—as it is to LEAP and inclusive excellence—is the abiding commitment that more students have access to, persist through, and complete high-quality undergraduate degrees. In 2009, the UW System signed on to the Education Trust/National Association of System Heads initiative Access to Success and, concurrently, identified a second phase of the Growth Agenda—called More Graduates for Wisconsin—establishing the goal to increase the annual number of undergraduate degrees conferred in the UW System by 30 percent by 2025. The UW System is working to cement that commitment through its 2011–13 biennial budget request to the state, which asks for targeted resources to advance the More Graduates goals, including increased funding for the expansion of high-impact practices at UW institutions. On a smaller scale, since 2008, the Office of Academic Affairs has dedicated resources directed at funding institutional proposals to strengthen Growth Agenda priorities, including support for high-impact practices and projects working to close the achievement gap.

I'd like to say that we have coordinated all of this work intentionally from the beginning. We have not. Coordination of this work is difficult; achieving buy-in is difficult. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned from Phase I is that a frame needs to be provided that invites people into the work, and the best way to do this is by putting these various initiatives into dia-

logue with one another. When we do that, the common purpose at the heart of the work becomes evident. LEAP has helped us counter resistance to and cultivate support for More Graduates and inclusive excellence, both of which have been perceived as top-down mandates. There has been a chorus of chancellor and provost voices from throughout the system telling us that the More Graduates work cannot jeopardize quality—in this case *more* must also mean “better-prepared” graduates. Our LEAP work ensures that we are responding, in collaboration with our campus colleagues, to that chorus. We are taking to heart AAC&U's 2010 statement on the quality imperative, which calls access to educational excellence “the equity challenge of our time,” at the same time that it insists that work focused on access and completion cannot come at the expense of quality and the learning essential to full participation in the global society (AAC&U 2010).

GIVE STUDENTS A COMPASS: INTEGRATION AT ITS BEST

The system's work on Give Students a Compass has emerged as the signature component of LEAP Wisconsin and a model for how best to strategically coordinate and integrate the change work at the heart of LEAP. Compass projects at the UW beta sites—UW–Eau Claire, UW–Milwaukee, and UW–Oshkosh—marry LEAP with inclusive excellence. The UW System identified these campuses for the Compass project, in fact, because of the work they were already doing on general education reform and the Equity Scorecard. The project has unfolded differently at each Compass site, in accordance with institutional mission and culture, student demographics, and faculty governance issues. In remarkable ways, UW–Eau Claire, UW–Milwaukee, and UW–Oshkosh are each focusing on particular high-impact practices (HIPs)

and underserved student populations in the effort to meet the curricular redesign goals of the project. And the opportunity to work with colleagues from the California State and the Oregon University Systems has proven invigorating and powerful.

Also exciting is the extent to which the goals of the Compass project have resonated with other UW campuses, providing a frame for the work they are already doing on curricular reform, HIPs, underserved student success, and Inclusive Excellence. At this point in time, every UW campus is engaged in Compass-like work. In November 2010, the system convened over 110 UW educators at an institute sponsored by the Compass project, designed to feature and advance the work in which UW System institutions are engaged. It became clear at the Institute that these projects represent just a fraction of the good work taking place at UW institutions. Recognition of the power of HIPs, when done well, is growing throughout the System. It is also clear that work on HIPs is bringing together academic and student affairs in new collaborations, with greater recognition of the roles and contributions that both entities bring to the table on behalf of students. Within the next few months, a newly developed System website will expand to become a repository for the collection and dissemination of those HIPs offered at UW institutions which have been proven to be especially effective (<http://www.uwsa.edu/vpacad/hips/>).

LOOKING FORWARD

For all the success we have experienced in the first phase, the UW System is not planning to rest on its laurels. In a volatile economy, amid competing priorities for scarce resources, the coin of the realm can lose its value. The work of building capacity—encompassing intentionality,

deeper understanding, visibility, shared responsibility, and leadership—will continue in Phase II. As Wisconsin's former Lieutenant Governor likes to put it, we want more people to become fluent in LEAP.

There are a number of activities underway to strengthen LEAP Wisconsin in Phase II, including renewal of SAGLA, convening a LEAP provosts group, and expansion of Compass work at UW institutions. Our Equity Scorecard work will continue. Phase II must focus on assessment of and accountability for student learning. The UW System is in the process of revising its annual accountability reporting. Beginning in 2009, the report started organizing its goals, benchmarks, and measures around the seven core strategies of the Growth Agenda. Strengthening our evidence and how we communicate it through public advocacy are the other broad areas to rethink in Phase II. This remains a challenge, but one that is best met through the continued and intentional articulation, coordination, and integration of LEAP Wisconsin with the various components of the Growth Agenda, including inclusive excellence and More Graduates. We need to be sure that our practice lives up to our language and that the dialogue we have initiated through LEAP Wisconsin with our constituents results in an integrative, coherent narrative.

At the system level, we stand in awe of what our institutional colleagues have accomplished. We are proud of the extent to which the change we are seeking in the UW System is being effected across institutions and through collaboration between the system and its institutions. The work described above speaks to the symbiotic nature of the potential and progress being achieved through LEAP Wisconsin: movement at the institutional level results in movement at the system level, and vice versa. It is there—in

the crux of that exchange—that LEAP advances both campus and system missions in ways that would not have happened otherwise.

At the heart of the Compass grant is the working hypothesis that state systems can serve as generative catalysts for change, in collaboration with and supported at the campus level. The same hypothesis is at play throughout LEAP and the Growth Agenda for Wisconsin. Through our pilot partner status, the UW System has played a lead role in helping AAC&U understand the potential for transformation that can occur at the system level, scaling up the unit of change from an individual institution to an entire system. As the first pilot partner named by AAC&U in the LEAP Campaign, the UW System was asked to deliver, and it has. Other LEAP states have now been named, and we welcome the opportunity to work with them. As our work on Compass has demonstrated, collaborating across state systems offers inspiration, generates new ideas, and results in the cross-fertilization of best practices and partnerships in ways that are filled with even more potential for systemic change, for meeting successfully that most important equity challenge of the twenty-first century. ■

REFERENCE

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2010. *The Quality Imperative: Match Ambitious Goals for College Attainment with an Ambitious Vision for Learning*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.