



*The mission of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is to make **liberal education and inclusive excellence** the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education. (Amended, November 2012)**

Liberal Education

A Statement of the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Adopted October 1998, in support of AAC&U's mission)

A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions. Liberal education requires that we understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities.

We experience the benefits of liberal learning by pursuing intellectual work that is honest, challenging, and significant, and by preparing ourselves to use knowledge and power in responsible ways. Liberal learning is not confined to particular fields of study. What matters in liberal education is substantial content, rigorous methodology and an active engagement with the societal, ethical, and practical implications of our learning. The spirit and value of liberal learning are equally relevant to all forms of higher education and to all students.

Because liberal learning aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance, sectarianism, and myopia, it prizes curiosity and seeks to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. By its nature, therefore, liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives.

The ability to think, to learn, and to express oneself both rigorously and creatively, the capacity to understand ideas and issues in context, the commitment to live in society, and the yearning for truth are fundamental features of our humanity. In centering education upon these qualities, liberal learning is society's best investment in our shared future.

** AAC&U's mission was expanded in 2012 to underscore AAC&U's conviction that liberal education and inclusive excellence are intertwined commitments. The Board of Directors has provided two statements (1998 and 2013) that illuminate the values of liberal education and the closely related goals of inclusive excellence.*

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Excellence

A Statement of the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities
(Adopted June 2013, in support of its expanded mission)

The Association of American Colleges and Universities' commitment to equity begins with the conviction that all students who have completed high school deserve the opportunity to attend college and to obtain an education that will prepare them well for work, life, and citizenship. The learning needed for full participation in the life of this diverse American democracy has long been what AAC&U means by a liberal education.

As AAC&U's board of directors affirmed in 1998, liberal education is "global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility." In embracing a diversity of ideas and experiences, liberal education likewise embraces a diversity of people, for the opportunity to learn with and from diverse peers is also a critical element of educational excellence. This commitment to diversity and equity in all their forms is what we mean by inclusive excellence.

To make excellence inclusive, our society must break free of earlier views that an excellent liberal education should be reserved for the few. Instead we insist that liberal education should be an expectation for all college students. Increasing college access and degree completion for all is necessary but insufficient to foster the growth of an educated citizenry for our globally engaged democracy. We need to define student success not exclusively as degree attainment, but also as the achievement of the primary goals of liberal education: broad and in-depth knowledge, the capacity to integrate and apply learning to new situations, and the intellectual creativity and resilience to face challenges.

We must be vigilant to ensure not only that all students have access to such an education, but also that they have an equitable opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. A high-quality education must be documented by robust assessment. At the institutional level, we need to provide effective evidence-based pedagogies and inclusive program designs. We must build on students' talents and capacities—focusing on the assets that all students bring to college rather than on perceived deficits.

Making excellence inclusive means attending both to the demographic diversity of the student body and also to the need for nurturing climates and cultures so that all students have a chance to succeed. Commitment to student success in these terms requires broad-based, compassionate leadership and equity-minded¹ practice—not only within individual institutions, but also across states and systems and in policy circles that make decisions affecting the nation. Seeking inclusive excellence requires reversing the current stratification of higher education and ensuring that all students develop capacities to prosper economically, contribute civically, and flourish personally.

Making excellence inclusive is a fundamentally democratic ideal. It expresses our confidence in the liberating power of education. Without inclusion, there is no true excellence.

¹ "Equity-mindedness" means that educational leaders, faculty, and staff demonstrate awareness of and proactive willingness to address their institution's equity and inequity issues (Bensimon 2007).

REFERENCES

AAC&U Board of Directors. 1998. "Statement on Liberal Learning." Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. www.aacu.org/about/statements/liberal_learning.cfm. (see reverse).

———. 2010. *The Quality Imperative*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Bensimon, Estela Mara. 2007. "The Underestimated Significance of Practitioner Knowledge in the Scholarship on Student Success." *Review of Higher Education* 30 (4): 441–69.

"A great democracy cannot be content to provide a horizon-expanding education for some and work skills, taught in isolation from the larger societal context, for everyone else....It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others."

—The Quality Imperative (AAC&U Board of Directors 2010)



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