

# 15

## Liberal Education and the Policy Landscape

Carol Geary Schneider and Debra Humphreys

We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education.<sup>1</sup>

—Woodrow Wilson, 1909

[T]rends in postsecondary education are moving in a very different direction. Not that there has been a policy debate about denying liberal education to some fraction of the college population. Rather, . . . liberal education [has been marginalized], moving it off the policy and public radar screen altogether.<sup>2</sup>

—Carol Geary Schneider, 2005

Taken together, the chapters in this book sketch the contours of an exciting emerging vision for twenty-first-century educational excellence. They document the many ways in which American colleges and universities are reinventing liberal education for today's students and challenges. Collectively, they detail a new approach to institutional change and curricular design that is focused not on whether students have accumulated a sufficient number of credits in arts and sciences disciplines, the so-called liberal arts, but, instead, on what students know and actually can do with their liberal education, both in relation to the wider world and in relation to their own life goals.

By adapting the traditions and strengths of American liberal education to twenty-first-century contexts and challenges, the most innovative colleges and universities in the country are charting a new course that, if applied more widely, could provide the majority of today's college

students with better preparation not only for professional success but also for the larger project of navigating a complex, fast-changing economy and exercising responsible judgment in their roles as citizens and thoughtful people.

Thanks in no small part to the leadership of faculty and academic administrators who see the value of a liberal education, there is a new intentionality on hundreds of campuses about a set of learning outcomes that are emerging as the key benchmarks for educational quality in the twenty-first century. Adapting the enduring goals of liberal education to the needs of a more globally interconnected society, these outcomes encompass broad knowledge of the wider world in all its interdependent complexities, including science, cultures, and society and the study of cross-cultural encounters and global interdependence. The essential outcomes also include a host of intellectual and practical proficiencies, such as written and oral communication skills, information literacy skills, and the ability to solve complex problems in diverse teams. Finally, these twenty-first-century liberal education outcomes include personal and social responsibility and civic knowledge as well as a sophisticated set of *integrative* capacities that enable college graduates to apply knowledge to real-world problems.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities describes the full set of these essential learning outcomes in its 2007 report *College Learning for the New Global Century*.<sup>3</sup> Colleges and universities in all sectors of higher education are developing curricular designs and educational practices to enable more students to acquire this broad set of learning outcomes and to assess their achievement of them. The most important challenge we face in fostering transformative learning is not the absence of good teaching and learning strategies or the absence of good curricular designs. Examples of good teaching and exciting integrative curricula can be found on many college campuses and in every sector of higher education.<sup>4</sup>

If one stayed only in the pace-setting colleges, universities, and innovative programs where faculty take seriously the challenge of helping students achieve a twenty-first-century liberal education, one easily could assume that we stand at the dawn of a new age of educational excellence—if we could muster enough resources to get the job done for all our students.

Unhappily, however, when we look beyond these islands of innovation and move into the realm of public policy and discourse, we find a very different landscape. Looking at higher education as a whole, we confront a state of affairs—endemic within our enterprise, but largely invisible to the public and to policy leaders—in which only *some* students benefit from the advantages of a strong, horizon-expanding liberal education, while

millions of others, typically underserved students from low-income and minority communities, are steered toward narrow training and significantly less empowering goals for their own learning.

At institutions with a strong commitment to the liberal arts and sciences, the majority of students will take a course of study that probes global developments, diversity and interdependence, the arts and humanities, social and cultural contexts, and the workings of science, as a discrete enterprise and in relation to the larger society. These forms of study—and the modes of inquiry that undergird them—build the societal insight and intellectual capacities that students need to navigate the global community, a fast-changing economy, and the complexities of their own lives.

But when students enroll in so-called career and technical programs, they get only a hint, or nothing at all, of this broader education. They will learn concepts and skills they need for a first job, or a specific job, but they will not develop the breadth of knowledge and adaptive capacities that give them the versatility to navigate the rapid pace of change across the economy. And, of course, students enrolled in narrowly designed curricula miss out on the richness that a liberal education brings to personal and civic life—the parts of higher education that prepare us for life, not just to make a living.

These inequities occur both within institutions and across all sectors, public and private, large and small, two year and four year. They are sobering in and of themselves, but more sobering still is the fact that policy makers have no interest in ensuring or expanding access to the benefits of a liberal education.

It is not the case that policy makers are indifferent to higher education altogether—it is, rather, quite the contrary! At the federal level, the state level, in regulatory bodies and in legislatures, as well as in many foundations, policy makers are decidedly interested in “fixing” higher education and expanding student success. Prevailing notions of the problems that need to be “fixed,” however, are indifferent to the larger aims or life-enhancing outcomes of a liberal education as the present volume envisions them.

In policy circles, higher education is all about the economy. Reading the evidence that the economy needs more workers with postsecondary education, policy leaders and legislators are determined to get more students into—and through—some form of postsecondary education. But, as we will see in this chapter, policy leaders have not spent much time asking what kind of learning today’s innovation-fueled economy requires and rewards. Overlooking the core point that a knowledge economy needs broadly educated people who can respond rapidly and constructively to new developments, policy makers at all levels have made job skills and

short-term training a priority while overlooking the importance of the very outcomes a liberal education develops.

If we—that is to say, those who recognize the value of liberal education to individuals and our society writ large—want to change this state of affairs, we will need to both engage and enlarge policy makers' and the public's understanding of what students need from a contemporary college education and why. We also will need to amend the prevailing public and policy views of what is “wrong” with higher education, of what needs to be “fixed,” and what broad-based solutions might look like.

In the remainder of this chapter, we examine the prevailing disconnects between the values of liberal education and current policy priorities as well as what we can do to remove these disconnects. In the final part of the chapter, we focus especially on the current dialogue about student success and how that policy dialogue can—and should—be reframed to include a strong focus on the quality of learning. The battle to make liberal education a resource for our entire society and all our students is far from lost, but it will take both creativity and long-term determination to make liberal education what it surely was a half century ago: a widely shared policy and educational priority, as the Truman commission report of 1947 made clear.<sup>5</sup>

## Higher Education and Current Policy Priorities

Colleges and universities are now far more in the spotlight than ever before in national discussions about public policy and the state of our nation. The economy is, of course, the main driver because, in sum, it is demanding more. In the influential recent report *Help Wanted*, Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues note that “By 2018, the economy will create 46.8 million openings; . . . nearly two-thirds of these 46.8 million jobs—some 63 percent—will require workers with at least some college education.”<sup>6</sup> Conversely, as Americans have already recognized, college—which used to be an option rather than a necessity for a middle-class life—has become the main gateway to jobs that support a middle-class lifestyle. Policy and public attention have jointly focused, therefore, on the importance of helping many more Americans both enroll in college and earn their degrees.

The new policy focus on higher education is not a bad thing, of course. It has created opportunities as well as problems for those who support liberal education, and we need to hold both the opportunities and the problems in view as we seek to clarify the value and importance of liberal learning for all. In fact, in nearly all jobs, the work environment now is placing a

premium on a broader set of skills and abilities along with sophisticated capacities to work in technologically rich environments to solve complex problems with teams of diverse individuals. In the coming years, it is clear that we need more college-educated workers who can succeed in jobs that increasingly require high-level analytic reasoning skills and complex communications capacities.<sup>7</sup> A recent survey of employers commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities confirms that new and existing jobs in today's economy require a broader skill set and higher levels of learning and knowledge. In this study, 91 percent of employers surveyed in late 2009 reported that their company or organization "is asking employees to take on more responsibilities and to use a broader set of skills than in the past"; 88 percent thought that "the challenges employees face within [their company] are more complex today than they were in the past."<sup>8</sup> Carnevale and his colleagues put it this way: "[The] growth in demand for postsecondary education dovetails with two major trends. First, the fastest-growing industries—such as computer and data processing services—require workers with disproportionately higher education levels." Secondly, over time, "occupations as a whole are steadily requiring more education."<sup>9</sup>

These trends are not new, but it is only in the past few years that national- and state-level elected officials have fully grasped the implications of these changing economic conditions for college-going students, especially in light of the nation's changing demographics. We should applaud the fact that many of our nation's governors and our current president appreciate how important college learning is to our nation's future.

Unfortunately, the fact that the economic data are so compelling is also a potential pitfall. The focus on higher education's importance to economic success has dramatically narrowed the public discussion about the aims and outcomes of college learning. The complexity of today's workplace is equally matched in the complexity of the challenges facing Americans as citizens, voters, family members, and community members. But few in America are thinking about the role of a transformative liberal education in preparing students for the challenges of responsible citizenship in a diverse democracy and an increasingly globally interconnected world. In fact, America is the only nation that has a tradition of liberal education that includes the aim of educating for responsible citizenship and for personal and social responsibility at the college level.<sup>10</sup>

Members of the American public do not necessarily know about this tradition, and their elected officials do not seem to treasure it as they should. Many nations around the world—including many emerging and fledgling democracies—are looking to the traditions of American liberal education to transform their own systems of higher education and to

broaden their focus beyond workforce development and technical training of leaders.<sup>11</sup>

Within their focus on the role of higher education in economic development, public and policy priorities have focused almost exclusively on increasing the sheer number of college graduates. Policy makers aren't wrong, of course, in asking whether enough students are entering and completing college. We do need many more college graduates than we currently are producing, but as we will see in the next section, the policy dialogue today is all about participation and completion rates. What students need to accomplish in college is barely on the policy horizon.

### **Complete to Compete: Measuring Throughput Isn't Enough**

It is extremely clear that the public has at least heard the economic message about higher education. Students are flocking to colleges and universities because they understand that a college degree is the ticket to opportunity in today's world. The number of individuals enrolled in college has risen from 15.3 million in 2000 to an estimated 19.1 million in 2010.<sup>12</sup> In one public opinion study, researchers note that "the number of people who thought that a higher education is *absolutely necessary for success* jumped dramatically, up from 31 percent as recently as 2000 to 55 percent in . . . 2009."<sup>13</sup> Policy makers, then, are taking their lead from the public in their unrelenting focus on the macroeconomic imperative of increasing the number of Americans with college degrees. They have listened to the economists *and* their constituents and have looked at *current* rates of college enrollment *and* college graduation and juxtaposed it to job projections and, rightly, "done the math."

They have turned their attention, therefore, to remedying the problem of low graduation rates. This is, in fact, a perfectly reasonable concern and one that our nation's leaders should, indeed, be addressing in concrete ways. Meeting the demands of a changing knowledge economy and helping to drive innovation and economic growth, however, will require much more than just graduating more people by pushing them through the existing system more quickly and efficiently. Those who are pushing this remedy alone are doing so with a limited understanding of what the problem really is and an even more limited sense of what twenty-first-century educational excellence really looks like and what it will take to bring it to many more students.

Initiatives geared toward increasing completion rates are multiplying rapidly. The National Governors Association (NGA), for instance, recently

launched Complete to Compete, with the goal of creating state policies that will “improve degree attainment and more efficiently use the dollars invested by states and students.” The initiative seeks to “regain excellence in higher education” by increasing the number of college graduates and, therefore, also increasing “our nation’s ability to compete internationally.” The entire initiative responds to the reality that many other nations now exceed ours in the percentage of young people who hold college degrees and the recognition of the need to compete economically in a knowledge economy. Among other things, the NGA initiative is calling for collection of better “outcome metrics.” However, even as the NGA speaks of outcomes, it is, in fact, focused not at all on “learning” outcomes, but instead on completion and student progress metrics (e.g., degrees and certificates awarded, graduation rates, remedial education rates, and transfer rates).<sup>14</sup>

This NGA initiative, of course, builds on President Obama’s efforts to reach an ambitious goal. As he stated in his speech announcing the American Graduation Initiative, his administration is seeking, by 2020, to “once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” While he failed to secure all the funding he requested from Congress to launch this initiative, his description provides significant insight into the priorities and assumptions of this administration in terms of higher education. For instance, he hoped to “offer competitive grants, challenging community colleges to pursue innovative, results-oriented strategies in exchange for federal funding.” His administration is seeking ways to “fund programs that connect students looking for jobs with businesses that are looking to hire” and to “challenge . . . schools to find new and better ways to help students catch up on the basics, like math and science, that are essential to our competitiveness.” Ultimately, the Obama administration seeks to “put colleges and employers together to create programs that match curricula in the classroom with the needs of the boardroom.”<sup>15</sup>

In its relentless focus on increasing college graduation rates specifically to increase economic competitiveness and reduce joblessness, the Obama administration also has joined forces with several large philanthropic organizations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which was featured at a 2010 White House Summit on Community Colleges. Melinda Gates spoke at the White House Summit and announced that the foundation was investing \$34.8 million over five years to dramatically increase the graduation rates of today’s community college students. The news release announcing this initiative quotes the foundation’s director of education, Hilary Pennington, noting that the initiative “aims to get community colleges to restructure how they interact with the majority of their students from the moment they enter the college to the time they graduate to provide them the quickest, straightest path to a degree. When

that happens, more students finish with a degree, certificate, or credential in hand." According to the foundation, this initiative will focus on "innovative approaches to financial aid counseling, course scheduling, and advising." To date, the foundation has not focused on ensuring that these students also achieve a broad set of learning outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

Other efforts focused on increasing graduation rates include the many initiatives funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education, including its efforts to increase adult degree completion and higher education productivity. In announcing its second-quarter 2010 grants, for instance, the Lumina Foundation noted in a press release that Lumina's grant making reflects the foundation's commitment to three primary goals: "students are prepared academically, financially and socially for success in education beyond high school; higher education completion rates are improved significantly; and, higher education productivity is increased to expand capacity and serve more students."<sup>17</sup> To its credit, the Lumina Foundation is one of only a handful of national foundations that also is attending to the actual content and quality of college programs through its investment in a "degree qualifications profile" and its "tuning" initiative, building on the Bologna Process in Europe. Like other foundations and most policy makers, however, the Lumina Foundation remains primarily focused on a "big goal"—"to increase the percentage of Americans with high-quality postsecondary degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025."<sup>18</sup>

### **Training Versus Liberal Learning: The False Either/Or Choice**

Many of the current higher education initiatives being supported by governmental and/or philanthropic efforts—including those sponsored by both the Gates and Lumina foundations—are focused on students who have traditionally been underserved in higher education: first-generation college students and those from underrepresented minority groups. This is, of course, both reasonable and desirable given the changing demographic makeup of America's population and its emerging workforce.

However, many of these first-generation students are being encouraged to pursue narrow training or certificate programs rather than full college degree programs that include both vocational education and the broad outcomes traditionally associated with a liberal education. Students from low-income and minority communities are significantly overrepresented, for example, in for-profit institutions.<sup>19</sup> Most for-profit institutions

were never designed to offer a liberal education; their primary focus is on so-called career fields and job training. All students see future employment as an important outcome of college, but we are presenting these first-generation students with a false either/or choice when we steer them to institutions that promise “gainful employment” as the sole result of college study. In so doing, we also may be limiting their career options rather than placing them onto a true ladder of opportunity.

In fact, it is quite clear from data about labor force trends and from employer surveys that all students need both job-specific skills and broad learning that transfers from job to job. The Hart Research Associates 2009 survey found, for instance, that nearly 60 percent of employers surveyed agreed that, to prepare for long-term career success, recent college graduates need *both* in-depth knowledge in a specific field *and* a broad range of skills and knowledge that apply to a range of fields and positions.<sup>20</sup> Employers are interested in this both/and strategy because they know the demands and work environments within their own companies are changing very rapidly. They also know that today’s recent college graduate is likely to change jobs very frequently. However, many policy makers seem to be operating with a twentieth-century vision of the economy. They have missed the fact that “Over the past several decades, about 70 percent of the increase in requirements for postsecondary training has stemmed from upgrades in skills demanded by occupational categories that previously did not require higher education. What we called a ‘foreman’ or ‘manufacturing supervisor’ in the late 1960s, for example, has morphed into new occupations that now require postsecondary education, including the modern manufacturing engineer.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite this new reality, first-generation college students are disproportionately represented in vocational job training programs rather than in the kinds of transformational degree programs described in this volume.<sup>22</sup> They, too, however, deserve the many benefits of a broader liberal education—including a shot at those jobs with the most promise for growth and higher income levels as well as those that require graduate-level education. As Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, recently wrote in a blog post, “Given the pace of technological and social change, it no longer makes sense to devote four years of higher education entirely to specific skills. By learning how to learn, one makes one’s education last a lifetime.” He notes that students “should develop the ability to continue learning so that they become agents of change—not victims of it.”<sup>23</sup> Policy solutions focused only on increasing students’ completion of narrower degrees or certificate programs will shortchange students and our nation’s future economic growth.

## What Is Broken and What Needs Repair?

All the various higher education initiatives sponsored by major foundations or policy makers—whether focused in the aggregate on increasing graduation rates or specifically targeting underserved students—make several assumptions about the state of higher education and about the most important aims and outcomes of college learning. Wise policy solutions, of course, must rest on accurate assessments of what actually needs fixing.

Policy makers assume that low graduation rates are the result of a combination of structural problems and misplaced priorities within higher education plus a broken K–12 education system. As a result, they are seeking remedies for such things as inadequate academic preparation at the K–12 level; miscommunication or a lack of information about college preparation and admissions; complex financial aid systems; insufficient data collection and analysis on students' progress toward degrees; and a general lack of emphasis on completion as a goal for institutional leaders.

These issues are, indeed, important, but they miss some crucial elements of our national education challenge. A singular focus on college completion—and all that might stand in the way of it—assumes that if a student does succeed in graduating, he or she must have attained the skills and knowledge needed to compete in the global marketplace. There is no evidence to support this assumption, and a growing body of evidence suggests the opposite.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities published a study as early as 2005 noting that “significant percentages of college graduates performed at quite low levels of basic literacy tasks.” While we lack many quality national studies measuring students' achievement of cross-cutting learning outcomes, those that do exist “contradict students' own rather positive perceptions of their learning gains from college.”<sup>24</sup> Studies of students' actual achievement also confirm what employers are saying about the abilities of recent college graduates. For instance, in late 2006, nearly two-thirds of the employers surveyed by Hart Research Associates for AAC&U agreed that “too many recent college graduates do not have the skills to be successful in today's global economy.”<sup>25</sup> In the 2009 survey, more than 70 percent of employers also urged colleges and universities to place more emphasis on teaching students such things as critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills, oral and written communication skills, global knowledge, and teamwork skills in diverse settings.<sup>26</sup>

A study conducted more recently by the Social Science Research Council also found that “existing organizational cultures and practices too often do not prioritize undergraduate learning. Large numbers of college students report that they experience only limited academic demands and

invest only limited effort in their academic endeavors.”<sup>27</sup> This report notes further that “given the limited academic engagement shown by many students, it is not surprising that we find that gains in student performance are disturbingly low.” Using results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, these researchers found that “on average, gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills . . . are exceedingly small or empirically non-existent for a large proportion of students.”<sup>28</sup> Studies conducted for AAC&U by researchers at the University of Michigan show that large numbers of students also report limited gains on significant personal and social responsibility outcomes from college, such as engaging diverse perspectives, contributing to the wider community, or engaging in ethical reasoning as a basis for action.<sup>29</sup>

Policy makers have finally awakened to the problems of inadequate K–12 preparation for college-level learning and much lower than adequate graduation rates, especially for traditionally underserved students. It is time for policy makers to recognize that the quality shortfall in college is just as urgent as this attainment shortfall. They need to learn much more about the kinds of educational practices that will not only increase retention and graduation rates but also show promise in increasing actual levels of achievement of important college learning outcomes.

There is virtually no discussion among policy leaders, in fact, about two key issues. No one in policy circles is discussing the fact that only *some* college programs are preparing students with the full complement of learning outcomes they need. Policy leaders also are seemingly unaware of the dramatic disparities in student experiences *within* institutions of higher education.<sup>30</sup> They are focused primarily on increasing students’ time to degree by improving productivity through better metrics of performance that take efficiency, but not learning outcomes or achievement levels, into account.

Absent from these discussions is the ambitious transformative educational vision at the heart of this book. Not only is this a tragedy because of the effect a liberal education can have on individual students, it is also a dangerously myopic public policy agenda, as it misses the essential message that many college graduates lack the skills and abilities they need to succeed in today’s workplace.

## High-Impact Educational Practices

We actually now know the kinds of educational environments and practices that increase both the likelihood of graduation and the achievement of key learning outcomes. When AAC&U published its 2007 report, *College*

*Learning for the New Global Century*, as part of its Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, it identified a set of effective educational practices that had existed on some campuses for many years but were now beginning to spread to campuses all across the country.<sup>31</sup> These so-called high-impact practices include such things as first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity and global learning, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects.<sup>32</sup> Since that report was first published, AAC&U has also published two follow-up reports that sketch out a much more comprehensive research base demonstrating the impact these kinds of engaged learning practices can have on those students who participate in them. Unfortunately, as George D. Kuh demonstrated in his report, *High-Impact Educational Practices*, "some groups of historically underserved students are less likely to participate in high-impact activities—those first in their family to attend college and African American students in particular." This is true despite the fact that "historically underserved students tend to benefit *more* from engaging in educationally purposeful activities than majority students."<sup>33</sup>

The 2010 report, *Five High-Impact Practices* by Jayne Brownell and Lynn Swaner (who also has a chapter in this volume), expands further the evidence base that suggests the positive outcomes these kinds of educational practices can have.<sup>34</sup> For example, multiple educational studies have shown that one high-impact practice that is increasingly common at both two-year and four-year colleges and universities—the learning community—has a positive impact on grades, persistence rates, ease of college transition, levels of academic engagement, intellectual development, levels of integrative thinking, writing and reading skills, appreciation for and engagement with different viewpoints, and rates of civic engagement. Unfortunately, data from the National Survey of Student Engagement show that only 17 percent of first-year undergraduate students actually participated in a learning community in 2007.<sup>35</sup>

### Real Versus Faux Reform

Increasing access to these kinds of high-impact practices must become part of the national policy agenda. Only if this happens can we hope to accelerate "real" versus "faux" reforms—reforms with real promise to increase students' levels of educational, civic, and professional success and contribute to our national economic recovery. Proposals to streamline educational pathways, reduce the need for remediation, increase graduation rates, and

reduce students' time to degree, if carefully designed, may be worthy, but they are by no means sufficient.

What, then, would real reform look like from a policy perspective? The educational change efforts described in this volume and the many efforts to spread the high-impact, high-effort educational practices one finds at colleges and universities around the country point the way toward an agenda of real reform.

The nation must begin its efforts to seek excellence in higher education with a set of common reference points for quality that build explicitly on the hallmark outcomes of a twenty-first-century liberal education as previously described. Setting the right goals for excellence must be the *sine qua non* of higher education quality. The parameters for, and educational pathways to, these reference points, of course, will need to be developed by educators themselves. Policy makers, however, need clarity about these reference points so they can use them to guide their building of appropriate accountability and data collection systems. It is profoundly self-defeating to invest in so-called productivity improvements that leave the actual quality of learning off the table altogether.

The good news is there is an emerging consensus both about what these reference points are and about the need to clearly communicate them to students. Many colleges and universities now have a common set of named learning outcomes for all students. In a recent survey of chief academic officers at AAC&U member institutions, for instance, nearly 80 percent reported that their college or university had common learning outcomes for all students. These lists of outcomes include many of those identified as essential learning outcomes in the influential 2007 LEAP report referenced earlier.<sup>36</sup> The outcomes named by AAC&U member institutions include many of these essential learning outcomes, such as broad knowledge of culture, history, and the physical and natural worlds; intellectual and practical skills; and capacities essential for exercising personal and social responsibility in both work and other settings.<sup>37</sup> Policy makers instituting new accountability and reporting requirements within states could accelerate "real reforms" just by requiring all colleges and universities to name a full set of learning outcomes calibrated to the economic and civic needs of a state, a region, or the nation. Policy makers and accrediting agencies also could use these outcomes and consensus reference points to guide program review and institutional oversight efforts.

Anyone actually on a campus or in the classroom knows, of course, that clarity about outcomes is just a first step. For students to achieve a set of broad learning outcomes, they must pursue these outcomes with intentionality and rigor long before entering college. These essential outcomes, then, need to be viewed as the shared accomplishment of school

and college—and of the disciplines and academic fields that are studied both in school and in postsecondary contexts. The set of common core standards adopted by more than thirty states to guide the next generation of K–12 education reform is a good first step. However, as yet, these standards cover only a limited number of learning outcomes in mathematics and language arts and were developed with only minimal input from college educators. Policy and educational leaders at both the K–12 and higher education levels must work much more closely together to develop aligned standards *and* curricular designs that foster a much broader set of learning outcomes and that include more engaged educational practices.

For instance, to prepare students better for responsible citizenship and for workforce success, cultivation of personal and social responsibility depends on a highly intentional educational experience that builds foundational learning at the school level and then immerses students with the complexity of our civic, global, ethical, and intercultural challenges, in general education and in the context of students' chosen majors. One or two courses on global and civic issues in high school and/or college are just not enough. The world is too complex, and students need to learn far more about its complexities than most of our graduates actually achieve. As AAC&U noted in its 2007 LEAP report, only a small fraction of college graduates are globally knowledgeable and competent.<sup>38</sup> This is a dangerous state of affairs.

Most of all, we need to recognize that the commitment to cultivating broad knowledge—of human cultures and the natural and physical world—requires a solid grounding in a whole array of academic studies, foundational experiences in key science disciplines, in U.S. and world histories, in the humanities and cultural studies and languages, and in thematic courses that engage students with the complexity of “big questions,” whether these are contemporary questions about issues such as global public health crises or enduring questions about the principles and practices that guide just societies. Employers and civic leaders alike want college graduates who understand today's global realities and contexts, but educating those graduates requires learning that is both deep and integrated, not—as it too often is—fragmented and superficial. Policy leaders must examine curricula to ensure greater levels of engagement and coherence rather than simply counting students and credits earned.

A necessary, if not sufficient, condition for producing a liberally educated graduate is a coherent, engaged, and aligned school-college curriculum. Or, to put it differently, school and college must work together to help graduates prepare intensively for the challenges of a turbulent global economy and the daily difficulties of global and democratic citizenship in a divided world.

Many colleges, universities, and public and private high schools have developed the broad parameters we need to take all these learning challenges seriously and to ensure that students acquire high-level skills, strong knowledge, and an examined sense of their responsibilities to self and others as they progress from school through college. But parameters are just an outline, and we have a long way to go before students even understand the goals they need to embrace, much less actually demonstrate high levels of accomplishment on the full range of essential learning outcomes.

### Productive Policy Proposals

Crafting public policy in the context of this national consensus and based on a set of educational reference points related directly to learning outcomes could lead to much more productive changes in educational practice and to real results for real students. Existing proposals such as those offered by the National Governors Association are not built on any notion of learning outcomes and are limited in their focus on graduation rates. However, they do present potentially positive policy directions that can begin to move us forward. For instance, the governors are intent on developing better tracking and data collection systems to enable policy makers and educators to understand how students are making their way through our complex systems of higher education institutions. These developments are spurred by the recognition that the majority of students in public higher education enroll in at least two and often more institutions as they progress toward degrees.<sup>39</sup> Policy makers are right to develop systems that can help us keep track of these peripatetic students from school through college and possibly postgraduate study as well.

Policy makers are also proposing to provide funding to develop policies and programs to increase college completion rates. If those policies are built on the educational research about high-impact educational practices that *both* increase retention and graduation rates *and* increase student achievement of important learning outcomes, these new incentives and the corollary tracking systems will be beneficial. If, on the other hand, policies reward institutions *only* for increasing their graduation rates with no attention to the quality of students' learning experiences, they could be very damaging to national efforts to meet ambitious goals for college learning.

It is quite clear from efforts in the K–12 sector that a sole focus on increasing graduation rates and meeting narrow achievement targets measured by standardized tests can result in the lowering of standards.

Respected Maryland school superintendent Jerry D. Weast argued this point in a meeting with *Washington Post* editors. He noted that the mandates for improvement in the legislation known as No Child Left Behind have “driven states toward lower standards that don’t prepare most students for college or careers.”<sup>40</sup> This likely occurred because states set low test “cut” or passing scores in order to ensure that most high school students would meet these states’ “standards.”

As we also have seen in watching K–12 “reform,” a focus on just a few learning outcomes can have serious negative consequences. Focusing primarily on language arts and mathematical skills in the establishment of state standards and testing regimes, the K–12 system has, in recent years, seen a serious narrowing of the curriculum that poses dangers to our nation’s economic future and to our participatory democracy.<sup>41</sup>

Higher education institutions, too, can all too easily reduce their own requirements in response to a narrowing of policy imperatives or reward systems. They can also increase their graduation rates by, for instance, increasing the selectivity of their admissions—a practice that clearly runs counter to the national need to increase college-going and graduating by precisely those who would be kept out of highly selective institutions given our current admissions practices and their overreliance on standardized tests. Policy leaders must be hypervigilant about the potential unintended consequences of particular accountability and performance requirements or new funding strategies.

Another troubling set of policy proposals are also related to these desires for greater productivity within higher education. These proposals, too, are inspired by the recognition that the United States is falling behind other nations in the percentage of young people who earn degrees. They focus, however, on simply speeding up the process to degree completion by cutting students’ time on task. Some have suggested that we shrink the high school curriculum by half and get students right into community college, where they can earn both the high school diploma *and* an associate’s degree in four years.<sup>42</sup>

Variants on this theme are flourishing all over the United States. Some are more modest; they propose only to cut high school by one year, since, as some have noted, “the senior year is a waste of time.” The assumption is that if students start college in high school, we can get them to a college degree faster. Others have proposed just cutting the requirements for college to only three years of study.<sup>43</sup>

There are a number of problems with these proposals. Proposals to substitute high school course-taking for college-level study take direct aim at some crucial elements in a transformative *college* education: science courses, humanities courses, and problem-centered interdisciplinary

courses. These are precisely the subject areas that students can get “out of the way” by selective early college enrollment in high school—with the result that they never get near “science as science is actually done” at the university level. Or, students may never engage the kinds of complex global or intercultural questions that rigorous college classes do so well. These strategies may accelerate the rate of degree production, but they will reliably reduce the quality of American capability. Policy makers, cash-strapped students, and parents all are attracted, not surprisingly, to these “shortened” degree program proposals. They need to know, however, that this approach may indeed save students money, but it may also leave them unprepared for long-term success. It is only possible to believe these kinds of reforms will “work” if one ignores the need for higher levels of learning demanded in this economy and in our society.

Other proposals have focused on reducing remediation rates. These proposals, too, while well meaning, rest on misplaced assumptions about the ability of existing standardized tests to tell us whether students are ready for college-level work and the actual gap between students’ current achievement levels and where we need to take them for true success.

Given the realities before us—a complex world that demands ever higher and broader levels of knowledge and skills, and seriously under-achieving students in both school and college—shrinking the time students actually spend on their academic work is exactly the wrong recipe for success. We do, of course, need to ensure that the time students spend in high school or college is not wasted. Instead, it must be spent on more integrative, rigorous, problem-based learning experiences. Few are counting how many of these kinds of experiences students actually have, either in high school or in college. More data could be gathered on these kinds of experiences and their impact on students’ actual achievement of learning outcomes.

Proposals to move students through narrow programs more quickly are mounting all around us. With the economic crisis deepening, legislators see these kinds of policy proposals as lifesavers. But they are, in fact, a disinvestment in our future.

## Convincing the Public—And Their Policy Leaders

The data cited in this chapter make clear that the public “gets” the growing importance of college in today’s economy. They have heard the economic message. Students are flocking to our nation’s colleges and universities—both those that are very affordable and those with very high costs. Unfortunately, many members of the public lack a full understanding of

the kind of college learning that will really help them and their children reach their own personal and professional life goals. With a public dialogue focused only on helping students “get in” and “get out,” it is hardly surprising that families lack good reference points, both for the learning outcomes students need and for the kinds of engaged learning practices that help students develop the needed capacities. To influence policy and move it in productive directions requires support from an informed public. Unfortunately, the academy has work to do to regain the public’s trust and confidence. The public’s confidence in the higher education sector to actually deliver on the promise of education is waning rapidly. Public Agenda’s 2010 study found that “six out of ten Americans now say that colleges today operate more like a business, focused more on the bottom line than on the educational experience of students. Further, the number of people who feel this way has increased by five percentage points in the last year alone and is up by eight percentage points since 2007.” The public is also beginning to question whether college is really worth the cost. For instance, “six in ten Americans agree that ‘colleges could take a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices.’ Over half (54 percent) say that ‘colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of education.’”<sup>44</sup>

Those who understand what high-quality education really is—including the power of high-impact educational practices and transformational educational programs—must become far more vocal and must start speaking directly to the public. Forces promoting narrow, vocational learning and more efficient educational practices based on flawed testing strategies are actually very well organized and are “making their case” in policy circles.

The efforts described in this book represent “real” reforms, but they will never reach a large scale if they are not better understood by both policy makers and the public. Educators must take the lead in explaining this new vision for learning and in confronting the myriad forces organizing to subvert it; this starts with clear communications with the public—especially with students, prospective students, and their parents.

The general public and the policy makers who serve that public must hear directly from educators and economists that narrow learning is not enough in an economy that thrives on innovation and that includes a high degree of mobility of workers at every level. They also must understand that college learning—at its best—is different from job training. Vocational training programs are valuable and certainly have their place within our society, but we shouldn’t confuse the public by calling them “colleges.”

Policy makers and educational leaders all have a role to play in helping the general public understand these realities—and what it will take

in reorganization and resources to get the job done right. And until this understanding improves, policy solutions will remain myopic, at best, and destructive, at worst. We need new markers of “success.” Retention and graduation rates are only partial indicators of student success—necessary but not sufficient. The college degree is meaningful only when it represents forms of learning that are both valued by society and empowering to the individual. Twenty-first-century metrics for students’ success, then, must capture that reality. They need to address evidence about the quality of learning as well as evidence about persistence and completion.

The long-term “college success” question must encompass not only whether students have earned a degree but also whether graduates are in fact achieving the level of preparation—in terms of knowledge, capabilities, and personal qualities—that will enable them to both thrive and contribute in a fast-changing economy and in turbulent, highly demanding global, societal, and personal contexts.

Whatever data systems, accountability frameworks, or funding strategies are developed, they must address not just what courses students take or how many credits they accumulate in a given period of time but also how students actually spend their educational time in college. For instance, how frequently, and with what results, do students actually engage in educational practices—curricular, cocurricular, and pedagogical—that provide them with realistic opportunities to actually develop the kinds of learning they need?

This expanded vision of student success—and how to foster it, assess it, and hold students and institutions accountable for it—provides a far stronger foundation for the future than the policy priorities and investments that now hold center stage. It is a vision that can fuel our economy, renew our democracy, and give all students—not just some—a passport to opportunity.

Those of us who have made liberal education our life’s work need to look beyond our individual institutions to the larger landscape of higher education’s role in the future of our society. We need to take an active role in building a robust debate about twenty-first-century learning and in creating new societal capacity to foster that learning.

As this book makes clear, we know “what works.” We now need to mobilize the determination to make “what works” a shared societal priority.

## Notes

1. Woodrow Wilson, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link, vol. 18 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 593–606.

2. Carol Geary Schneider, "Liberal Education: Slip-Sliding Away?" in *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*, ed. Richard H. Hersh and John Merrow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
3. Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007), 12, [www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/Global-Century\\_final.pdf](http://www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/Global-Century_final.pdf).
4. Hart Research Associates, *Learning and Assessment: Trends in Undergraduate Education* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009).
5. George F. Zook, *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1947); Truman Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education*, vol. 1, *Establishing the Goals* (New York, 1947).
6. Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010), 13.
7. Claudia D. Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008).
8. Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl, *Help Wanted*, 5.
9. Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl, *Help Wanted*, 13.
10. Sjur Bergan and Radu Damian, *Higher Education for Modern Societies: Competences and Values*, Council of Europe Higher Education Series, no. 15 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2010).
11. Paul Hanstedt, "Hong Kong's Experiment in Integrative Teaching and Learning," *Liberal Education* 96, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 18–23; The World Bank, *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2000).
12. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2018* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), table 10.
13. Public Agenda, *Squeeze Play 2010: Continued Public Anxiety on Cost, Harsher Judgments on How Colleges Are Run* (San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010), 3.
14. National Governors Association, *Complete to Compete* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association, 2010).
15. President Barack Obama, "Remarks at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan," *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* (July 14, 2009): 3–5, [www.gpoaccess.gov/presdocs/2009/DCPD-200900565.pdf](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/presdocs/2009/DCPD-200900565.pdf).
16. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, "Foundation Launches \$35 Million Program to Help Boost Community College Graduation Rates," news release, October 4, 2010, [www.gatesfoundation.org/press-releases/Pages/increasing-community-college-graduation-rates-101004.aspx](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/press-releases/Pages/increasing-community-college-graduation-rates-101004.aspx).

17. Lumina Foundation for Education, "The Case for Improved Higher Education Access and Attainment," [www.luminafoundation.org/our\\_work](http://www.luminafoundation.org/our_work).
18. Lumina Foundation for Education, "The Case for Improved Higher Education Access and Attainment."
19. Mamie Lynch, Jennifer Engle, and Jose Cruz, *Subprime Opportunity: The Unfulfilled Promise of For-Profit Colleges and Universities* (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, 2010).
20. Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010), 6.
21. Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl, *Help Wanted*, 14.
22. Marsha Silverberg, Elizabeth Warner, Michael Fong, and David Goodwin, *National Assessment of Vocational Education: Final Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004); Xianglei Chen, *First-Generation Students in Postsecondary Education: A Look at Their College Transcripts* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).
23. Michael Roth, "In Defense of 'Learning How to Learn,'" *Good Feed Blog*, October 16, 2010, <http://goodmenproject.com/2010/10/16/in-defense-of-learning-how-to-learn/>.
24. Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005), 6.
25. Hart Research Associates, *How Should Colleges Prepare Students to Succeed in Today's Global Economy?* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2006).
26. Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar*, 9.
27. Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Esther Cho, *Improving Undergraduate Learning: Findings and Policy Recommendations from the SSRC-CLA Longitudinal Project* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2011), 2.
28. Arum, Roksa, and Cho, *Improving Undergraduate Learning*, 4.
29. Eric L. Dey and Associates, *Developing a Moral Compass: What Is the Campus Climate for Ethics and Academic Integrity?* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010); Eric L. Dey and Associates, *Engaging Diverse Viewpoints: What Is the Campus Climate for Perspective-Taking?* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010); Eric L. Dey and Associates, *Civic Responsibility: What Is the Campus Climate for Learning?* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009).
30. George D. Kuh, "What We're Learning about Student Engagement," *Change* 35, no. 2 (2003): 24–32.
31. Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, 12.
32. More information on high-impact practices can be found in George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008).

33. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices*, 17.
34. Jayne E. Brownell and Lynn E. Swaner, *Five High-Impact Practices: Research on Learning Outcomes, Completion, and Quality* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010).
35. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices*, 16.
36. Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, 12.
37. Hart Research Associates, *Learning and Assessment*, 4.
38. Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, 12.
39. Peter Ewell, *The New "Ecology" for Higher Education: Challenges to Accreditation* (Alameda, CA: Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2010), 1.
40. Daniel de Vise, "Montgomery Schools Chief Says Federal Mandate Is Lowering Standards," *Washington Post*, June 28, 2007, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/27/AR2007062702845.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/27/AR2007062702845.html).
41. Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
42. National Center on Education and the Economy, *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).
43. Lamar Alexander, "The Three-Year Solution: How the Reinvention of Higher Education Benefits Parents, Students, and Schools," *Newsweek*, October 26, 2009, 26–29.
44. Public Agenda, *Squeeze Play 2010*, 2.

This discussion presents liberal education's non-Western, Western, and u.s. historical roots as a backdrop for discussing its contemporary global resurgence. Analysis from the Global Liberal Education Inventory provides an overview of liberal education's renewed presence in each of the regions and speculation about its future development. Save. Cite.Â BeckerJonathan "What a Liberal Arts Education is . . . and is Not" Bard Institute for International Liberal Education 2003 <http://iile.bard.edu/research/>. BeckerJonathan "What a Liberal Arts Education is . . . and is Not" Bard Institute for International Liberal Education 2003. <http://iile.bard.edu/research/>.