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What Really Matters in College

LEAP

ABOUT THIS SERIES

On the occasion of its nineti-eth anniversary in 2005, the Association of American Colleges and Universities launched Liberal Education and America's Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College (LEAP), a ten-year national campaign to champion the value of a liberal education.

In coordination with the LEAP campaign, and in an effort to encourage public dialogue and debate about what really matters in college, this series of articles presents a broad array of perspectives on the value of liberal education.

For additional information about the LEAP campaign and how to get involved, see www.aacu.org/advocacy.

LIBERAL EDUCATION and America's Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College (LEAP), the decade-long campaign launched earlier this year by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), rests on two fundamental premises. The first holds that there is an emerging, if hidden, consensus among business and civic leaders, professional accreditors, and college educators on the key outcomes of a quality undergraduate education. This consensus underlines the importance of an engaged and practical liberal education for all students, regardless of their chosen institution or field of study.

The LEAP campaign builds on the work of the AAC&U initiative Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College. In that project's influential report (2002), a national panel of leaders from a wide array of sectors both within and outside of the academy suggests that far more is, and should be, expected of today's students both in school and after they graduate. In order to ensure that all students meet these expectations, students themselves and their institutions must become far more intentional about preparing for and working toward a specific set of essential outcomes of college learning. This conclusion forms the second fundamental premise of the LEAP campaign.

Given this focus on key outcomes, these greater expectations for student learning and achievement, and the importance of intentionality, AAC&U has been exploring what different constituents know and think about the emerging consensus around outcomes, and whether different constituent groups—employers, students, faculty, accrediting agencies, recent graduates—see liberal education, as we do, as the most valuable form of education for our time. Through the Greater Expectations initiative and the Presidents' Campaign for Liberal Learning campus-community dialogues, AAC&U began this research by sponsoring conversations among business and academic leaders. The previous article in this series addressed some of the concerns of business leaders and why they are, indeed, so supportive of raising expectations and ensuring that all students receive an engaged and practical liberal education (see Jones 2005).

AAC&U also commissioned a series of student focus groups in four locations in different regions of the country. In each location, one discussion was held with public high school seniors or rising seniors who plan to pursue a baccalaureate degree, and a second discussion was held with advanced college students at both public and private colleges and universities. The eight focus groups explored the students' own hopes, concerns, expectations, and goals regarding college. We sought to understand their attitudes about and perceptions of liberal education, as well as the degree to which they recognize the value to their own futures of a liberal education and its key outcomes. The findings of these focus groups reveal that the learning outcomes business, civic, and academic leaders consider the most important either are not understood by, or are low priorities for, today's students.

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How Students View & Value Liberal Education

Utah State University

Findings

Professional success was identified by the participants in all eight focus group as the primary reason for pursuing a college degree, which students recognize as a basic requirement for success in today's competitive job marketplace. They understand, further, that college is important not only for obtaining a first job, but also for career advancement and success down the line. The current competitive and troubling economic environment seems to be driving students to focus only on narrow job categories and majors, however, rather than on the knowledge, skills, and capacities they actually will need in their working lives and in their lives as citizens, family members, and fulfilled human beings.

Students from both the college and the high school focus groups associated a wide array of positive emotions with college, but the high school students' anticipation about college was mixed with anxiety about making the transition to college life successfully. The college students reported high levels of stress related to the demands of college life and preparing for the job market, while the high school students expressed particular concern about the need for a very clear sense of their future employment goals and a specific choice of major to lead them to those goals. As one high school student in Indianapolis put it, "it's daunting to have to decide right now what I'm going to have to do with the rest of my life . . . where I'm going to go to school, what I'm going to study, who I involve myself with. It is all encompassing about how I'm shaping my future, what I'm going to do with my life, how I'm going to make money for the rest of my life. It's just daunting."

In fact, when asked whether the degree is simply a "piece of paper" or credential, or if it represents significant achievement that will enable long-term success and fulfillment, the students were not in agreement. Some saw the degree as simply a "piece of paper"; others saw it as evidence of the attainment of knowledge, skills, and experience that enhance both professional and personal success. Two representative students articulated these different viewpoints. "I don't think it [the degree] means much of anything," said a college student in Alexandria, Virginia. "It's just a piece of paper. But that piece of paper will get you the interview at whatever job you want." A college student from Portland, Oregon, suggested that "college is about becoming a more well-rounded person—knowing, gaining . . . getting a wide variety of facts and knowledge about the world to become a better individual and a better citizen. . . . I think it's valuable for being in the workforce," this student said, "but I think it's perhaps more valuable for personally gaining knowledge and understanding."

Students are receiving these messages from their parents, but also from high school teachers and guidance counselors, and from the society at large. What they are not receiving is *specific* information about the challenges they will face in college or the specific outcomes of college that employers identify as essential. At least some students are getting lots of information about requirements for gaining admittance to college and guidance on how and when to apply, but they are not told what or how they will be expected to study once they get to college—or how they can best prepare to succeed there. The message about preparation seems to be simply "work hard, since college learning is difficult"—not a very helpful message to guide one's actual choices and actions.

The students we interviewed who felt the most prepared for college were those who had taken Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate classes. The high school students who had taken these classes believed that these more demanding curricula and heavier course loads reflected the academic rigor of college. The college students' evaluations of AP classes varied, however. Some felt that general education courses in college simply rehashed what they had already learned in high school, while others felt they were unprepared

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for the demands of some college classes despite having taken AP classes in those fields of study.

Given the messages these students are receiving, it is not surprising that we found high school students largely uninformed about the college curriculum and quite uncertain about its demands. The resources available to guide their preparation for college life are clearly very limited. Students do not regard high school guidance counselors or colleges themselves as trusted sources of information. Operating in this vacuum and in a general climate of skepticism about the advice they are receiving, students have little understanding of the kinds of learning either their future employers or faculty members believe are most important, and they don't even know that this gap in their knowledge is important.

Important outcomes

While some regard the college degree as little more than a "piece of paper," most students believe that something important goes on during the college years. The problem is they don't have a clear sense of what that "something" is or ought to be. They are in no position to be intentional about working on precisely those outcomes most important to their future success and to the future success of our society.

How, then, do students view the specific learning objectives they will be pursuing in college?

It was extremely difficult for the students in our focus groups to name specific outcomes of college that are important to them. In generating their own lists of important outcomes, they tended to describe very general aptitudes

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and dispositions. They placed the greatest priority on gaining a sense of maturity, time-management skills, strong work habits, self-discipline, and teamwork skills. With the exception of teamwork skills, however, the students did not recognize these skills as being direct outcomes of the college curriculum as much as they viewed them as products of their own ability to handle the greater independence, freedom, and responsibility gained at college.

In addition to generating their own lists of important outcomes, the focus group participants were asked to identify the five most critical and the two least critical outcomes of college from a list of about sixteen different choices. Table 1 shows how the students generally ranked the various outcomes that both the academic and business communities value most. As one can see from these student rankings, some outcomes that AAC&U members and many members of the business community value very highly—e.g., global understanding, civic engagement, a sense of values and ethics, intercultural skills and knowledge—are not considered important goals for college learning by today's students.

We discovered that some students do believe these low priority outcomes *are* important, but they either think that one develops enough skills in these areas in high school, or they simply feel that the outcomes fall outside the purview of what is appropriate in a *college* education. For instance, nearly all the students who participated in our focus groups reported that they already possess sophisticated computer skills and believed themselves to be capable of updating these skills as needed throughout their lives.

Table 1 **Student Rankings**

Most Important Outcomes

1. A sense of maturity and how to succeed on your own
2. Time-management skills
3. Strong work habits
4. Self-discipline
5. Teamwork skills and the ability to get along with and work with people different from yourself

Mid-Tier Outcomes

6. Tangible business skills, and a specific expertise and knowledge in your field of focus
7. Independent and critical thinking/reasoning skills
8. Strong writing and oral/speaking skills
9. Improved ability to solve problems and think analytically
10. Exposure to the business world
11. Leadership skills

Least-Valued Outcomes

12. Sense of values, principles, and ethics
13. Tolerance and respect for people of other backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and lifestyles
14. Competency in computer skills and software
15. Expanded cultural and global awareness and sensitivity
16. Appreciation of your role as a citizen and an orientation toward public service

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Nearly all the students we interviewed regarded civic engagement as something that might be important to some individuals, but not as something that a college education should address. Some of the students went so far as to suggest that activities like service learning might distract from the more important work of their own *individual* self-development—the primary reason they gave for attending college.

It is very important to note that the priorities of the advanced college students differed very little from those of the high school students and that these findings about priorities are highly consistent in all four regions of the country where the focus groups were held. It seems that their time in college had not really changed these students' views of the most important outcomes of college.

Finally, while most of the focus groups were conducted in the summer of 2004, two were held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in March 2005. In these groups, we changed some of the language we used to describe certain outcomes, and we added a few outcomes to the list. Nonetheless, the lists of priorities generated by these students are still quite similar to the listing shown in Table 1. They ranked the three newly added outcomes—expanded knowledge of cultures and societies outside the United States, expanded knowledge of American culture and history, and expanded understanding of science and its relevance to other areas of study—at the very bottom of their lists of priorities. Overall, expanded understanding of science was ranked as the very least important outcome in the two focus groups where that topic was addressed. These students also told us that, as they already have studied American culture and history in high school, there is no need to continue to study those subjects in college.

As readers of this journal are no doubt aware, a good liberal education comprises many of the outcomes on these lists. And few in the academy believe that a well-educated person needs, for instance, little science or history education beyond high school to function effectively in today's society. It is clear from our discussions with these students that there is a serious disconnect between what students value and the vision of liberal education championed by the AAC&U community.

Liberal education

We also used the focus groups to explore students' familiarity with the term "liberal education" itself as well as their impressions of the current practices that define it. Most of the high school and college students we interviewed had not heard the term liberal education. To the extent that a few participants discerned some of the key values and principles of the concept, they associated it only with liberal arts colleges. When asked to define what liberal education means to them, most of the participants, high school and college students alike, were unable to provide an accurate definition. And even those few who did have some sense of it had not actually heard of liberal education; instead, they deduced a definition based on a variety of associations. As one Portland high school student put it, "I associate it [liberal education] with a broad education and openness to different things. It's an education that will prepare me for what I need to know either at the present time in my life or for my future. It's a good point that you take what you can from it."

Some in the groups associated a liberal education with relevant values and qualities such as being "well-rounded" or getting an educational "foundation" or "breadth of focus." Some said that a liberal education "encourages critical thinking" or "promotes individualism." Some also linked it directly to the arts and humanities, but not to the sciences. Nearly all the college students associated it with general education elements of the curriculum rather than the whole of the educational experience.

Other students stated that a liberal education is an education politically skewed to the

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left or that it represents an approach to education according to which there are no right or wrong answers. For example, one college student in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, told us that "[liberal education] is an education directed toward understanding alternative methods, most often political in nature. A liberal education would be the opposite of a conservative education. Conservative education focuses on a more individualistic approach to problem-solving, while a liberal education would focus more on a communal approach to problem-solving." Finally, several students identified a liberal education as one that provides students with total freedom and latitude in selecting their courses and fulfilling their requirements.

After discussing with these students their own definitions of liberal education, we presented them with the following brief definition:

> Liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. A liberal education comprises a curriculum that includes general education that provides students broad exposure to multiple disciplines and more in-depth study in at least one field or area of concentration.

Many of the high school students responded very positively to this definition, and most of them expressed a preference for attending a college that offers such an education. Yet many of these students were unsure about whether most colleges and universities currently do offer a liberal education or not. Most—though not all—the college participants, on the other hand, said that their schools offer this type of education.

While many of the high school students who participated in the sessions were positively disposed toward a liberal education, those high school and college students who were the most career focused and who had the clearest sense of vocational direction were also the least likely to embrace liberal education as appropriate for them. As one Milwaukee, Wisconsin, high school student put it, "I know exactly what I want to do. . . . I basically

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have the next four years of my life planned completely out, and if I had to sit in classes that were meant to expand my horizons, I would be very upset because that's not my focus. . . . I feel that would be wasting my time." Another Wisconsin high school student suggested that liberal education is "a dumb idea, because I kind of know basically what I want to do, and this will probably throw a bunch of stuff in there that has nothing to do with it."

Opinions about the value of liberal education were much more sharply divided among the college students we interviewed—each of whom had at least some experience with elements of it. Many liked the definition of liberal education they were given—at least in principle. However, several of the college students felt that their own experience of liberal education fell short of this ideal.

The most significant point of difference in the reactions of high school and college students relates to general education requirements. The view that these requirements detract from a students' major, rather than enhance it, surfaced repeatedly among the college students.

Moreover, many of the college students felt that their general education courses were completely disconnected from their majors, and they were dissatisfied with the limited options their colleges offer for fulfilling these requirements. Some other students felt that their general education classes taught them nothing they hadn't already learned in high school. For example, one college student in Indianapolis remarked that he "had all the broad general education [in] high school. I expected something more from college," he said. "When I got there, I felt like I was repeating the same things that I had learned in high school. Not a whole lot was tailored to what I want to do with my life. It was kind of disappointing."

Conclusion

What does this all mean for these students' futures, for the future of higher education, and for our shared future? Business leaders in a wide array of sectors are proclaiming the new importance to our economy of analytical, contextual, integrative, scientific, and creative thinking. With increasing urgency, employers are calling for graduates who are skilled communicators, adept at quantitative reasoning, oriented to innovation, sophisticated about diversity, and grounded in cross-cultural and global learning. Civic leaders are expressing concern about declining rates of civic knowledge and political participation among the young and about what this trend might mean for the future of our democracy.

In today's knowledge-fueled world, the quality of student learning is our key to the future. It is no longer enough for students merely to complete the right number of courses. The breadth and sophistication of their learning in college actually matters to success—to individual success, economic success, and the success of our democracy. We know that there is much more work to be done within the academy to ensure that all students reach this breadth and sophistication in their learning. But surely the first step is to help students, prospective students, and their parents understand not only that it is important to attend and graduate from college, but also what really matters in college. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, *with the authors' names on the subject line.*

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