

Communicating Commitment to Liberal Education



A SELF-STUDY GUIDE FOR INSTITUTIONS



*Association
of American
Colleges and
Universities*

The logo features the word "LEAP" in a dark blue, serif font. To the right of the text is a five-pointed star in a light olive green color. The background consists of a dark olive green top section, a light olive green middle section, and a dark blue bottom section, separated by curved white lines.

LEAP

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Introduction



IN JANUARY 2005, THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (AAC&U)

launched a major national campaign to champion the value of a liberal education. Called Liberal Education and America’s Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College (LEAP), this campus-action and advocacy campaign is designed to expand public and student understanding of the kinds of learning that truly empower individuals and demonstrably help students achieve the aims and outcomes of a twenty-first-century liberal education.

The LEAP campaign builds on an earlier AAC&U initiative, Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College. The report from the Greater Expectations initiative, issued by a national panel of business, academic, civic, and school leaders, recommends a learning-centered and purposeful approach to the entire educational experience as the surest way for all students to reach high levels of achievement. The academy as a whole, as well as each individual college and university, must speak clearly and coherently about the aims and outcomes of a college education that really matter for success in the twenty-first century.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT A CONSENSUS IS EMERGING ABOUT THE KIND OF LEARNING AMERICANS NEED TO THRIVE.

Business leaders, for instance, have formed a virtual chorus to proclaim the importance of analytical, contextual, and creative thinking to our economy. They are calling for graduates versed in communication skills, adept at quantitative reasoning, oriented to innovation, sophisticated with diversity, and grounded in intercultural and global learning. Civic leaders proclaim the importance of civic, personal, and social responsibility to active and effective participation in civic life. They are calling for graduates prepared to make skilled contributions to solving the world’s many pressing problems. The very capabilities that will serve students in their working and civic lives are precisely those that a liberal education fosters. Based on this consensus, AAC&U has developed an overview of essential liberal education outcomes for twenty-first-century learning (see page 3).

Yet as AAC&U’s own public opinion research has shown, both prospective and current college students are unaware of the importance of these essential learning outcomes. Moreover, they—and many in the academy—lack a common vocabulary to describe the practices and curricula that lead to these outcomes. In response, the LEAP campaign seeks to develop this common language while it also supports the literally hundreds of campuses now working to become more intentional and more educationally effective.

Some hesitate to use the term “liberal education” because they believe it signifies something from an earlier era that is now outmoded, or because the word “liberal” carries unhelpful political

connotations. Yet, “liberal education” is the best and most accurately descriptive term available for the kind of college education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement. Moreover, liberal education has always set the standard for excellence within American higher education. AAC&U member institutions are at the forefront of the twenty-first-century reinvigoration of liberal education. (For information about making the case for liberal education using effective language, see the companion AAC&U publication, *Making the Case for Liberal Education: Responding to Challenges*.)

But are educational leaders explaining clearly to current and prospective students how a contemporary liberal education can provide them with what they need to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century? Through the LEAP campaign, AAC&U is working with leaders at all levels, national, state, and institutional. However, this institutional self-study guide has been specifically designed for use by leaders at the campus level. Campus leaders know better than anyone that current and prospective students receive multiple and often conflicting messages, both intended and unintended, about what really matters in college. This guide, therefore, can be used by campus leaders across departments and divisions as they come together to examine the ways their own institutions communicate with their students.

THROUGH LEAP, AAC&U IS TRYING TO HELP ALL WHO CARE ABOUT THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA TO DO A BETTER JOB OF COMMUNICATING THEIR COMMITMENT TO LIBERAL EDUCATION. There are many positive stories to tell about the powerful learning opportunities available on campuses today. AAC&U members across the country are providing students with the kind of learning experiences they need to achieve the essential outcomes of a liberal education. Indeed, the contemporary academy is awash in innovative programs, curricula, and pedagogies that are bringing new vigor and vitality to the undergraduate learning experience and that—collectively—define a twenty-first-century liberal education.

The questions campus leaders need both to ask and to answer concern whether students are aware of how these innovative programs might collectively contribute to their own achievement of essential learning outcomes. Do students know where they are headed and how their college learning can help them get there? Is the institution as a whole communicating a coherent message about its core commitment to liberal education? Are students being provided with a compass they can use to guide them as they prepare for college and as they make their way through college on the way to a degree?

THE FOLLOWING SETS OF GUIDING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO HELP CAMPUS LEADERS ASSESS THE VARIOUS MESSAGES THEY ARE SENDING ABOUT WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN COLLEGE. In addition to ensuring that the institution as a whole is communicating its commitment to liberal education as coherently and as effectively as possible, this “intentionality audit” can be used to determine how professed goals are aligned with actual practices. This institutional self-study guide can also be used by campus leaders as a way to engage trustees and other key constituent groups in campus-wide strategic planning and curriculum reform efforts.

Liberal Education and America's Promise

Essential Learning Outcomes



Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by developing the following learning outcomes:

KNOWLEDGE of Human Cultures and the Natural World

- grounded in study of the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
- focused through engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL SKILLS

- inquiry, critical and creative thinking
- written and oral communication
- quantitative literacy
- information literacy
- teamwork and problem solving

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- intercultural knowledge and competence
- ethical reasoning and action
- foundation and skills for lifelong learning

INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

- synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
- the demonstrated capacity to adapt knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and questions

1 Mission and Leadership

There are many ways a college or university conveys its core values and what it seeks to accomplish for students. The president and trustees, however, have a special role to play in communicating these values and essential learning outcomes. As Jack Meacham and Jerry Gaff note in a recent issue of *Liberal Education*, “[Presidents and trustees] must be certain that their organization does what it says and says what it does.” For this reason, an institution’s mission statement is an essential component of any effort to communicate clearly about the liberal education goals of a college or university. It is “an institution’s formal, public declaration of its purposes and its vision of excellence. Ideally it contains enough specificity for determining whether alternative educational and institutional practices could advance the mission.” As Meacham and Gaff note, a mission statement is not the same as the actual mission of an institution—“the living sense among individuals in diverse roles of what that institution is and why it is important.” But without a clear mission statement that reflects widespread agreement and shared understanding about priorities and key goals, it is unlikely that a lived mission will emerge in practice. Beyond presidents and trustees, faculty and student affairs leaders, too, should understand the mission of their institution and use its language as they guide students through multiple learning pathways (2006, 6).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Does your campus have a clear mission statement?
- Does the mission statement include an explicit commitment to providing a liberal education to all students?
- Is there a campus-wide statement describing the learning outcomes all students are expected to achieve? Are these outcomes explicitly identified as the outcomes of a twenty-first-century liberal education?
- Is the mission well understood by all campus groups and agreed upon, or are there varying interpretations?
- Are students aware of the institution’s learning goals? How would you know if they were not?
- Do the educational leaders of the institution regularly incorporate the language of liberal education and learning outcomes into their speeches and writings?
- Have the trustees or regents of your campus embraced the mission?
- When describing the institution’s mission and learning goals, do brochures or Web sites of individual departments and programs use a shared language?

MISSION STATEMENTS

The mission of **DUKE UNIVERSITY** is to provide a superior liberal education to undergraduate students, attending not only to their intellectual growth but also to their development as adults committed to high ethical standards and full participation as leaders in their communities.

FRANKLIN & MARSHALL is a residential college dedicated to excellence in undergraduate liberal education. Its aims are to inspire in young people of high promise and diverse backgrounds a genuine and enduring love for learning, to teach them to read, write, and think critically, to instill in them the capacity for both independent and collaborative action, and to educate them to explore and understand the natural, social, and cultural worlds in which they live.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY is committed to melding professional and technical instruction with quality liberal education.

The **UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT** prepares its students to live productive, responsible, and creative lives through a high-quality liberal education.

2 Admissions and Outreach

On many campuses, the admissions office is entirely separate from the academic departments and other units responsible for the actual learning that is at the core the college's or university's mission. Yet, the admissions office is usually the first "face" of an institution that students encounter—and, as everyone knows, first impressions count for a lot. Recent public opinion research conducted as part of the LEAP campaign suggests that today's students are getting very little information about learning outcomes or expectations from admissions materials. Today's students are also very media and marketing savvy and see nearly all admissions materials in the same light as any other marketing item designed to sell them a product. This research suggests that more specificity and candor about what college life is really all about—and what really matters in college in terms of learning outcomes and practices—could go a long way in attracting student interest and encouraging serious consideration of an institution.

In addition to their success or failure in attracting applicants, the messages conveyed through admissions materials—whether brochures, Web sites, or advertisements—may have a significant and lasting impact on how students understand their own purposes in pursuing a college degree. These messages are also likely to inform their understanding of what they will be expected to do as college students.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Do admissions materials include a set of clear expectations the institution has for student learning outcomes and behavior? Do admissions materials actually use the term "liberal education" to describe those outcomes?
- Are these clear expectations communicated to high school leaders and to the families of prospective students?
- Do faculty members discuss the institution's learning goals and expectations with teachers or educational leaders at local or feeder high schools?
- Does the admissions process ask students to reflect on their prior learning and how it has prepared them to succeed in college?
- Does the admissions process include an assessment of actual examples of high school senior-year work? Is such assessment used to place students in college courses and/or to help them understand how to prepare to succeed in college?
- Do admissions materials stress the campus' own educational values and commitments—its unique selling points?
- Do admissions materials accurately reflect the campus culture and how it is experienced by different groups of students?

3 Faculty

While campus leaders can be influential in clarifying and communicating goals for learning—and generating a vision shared by all—students will be most influenced by the messages sent by the individual faculty members in the courses they take. All students quickly get the message that the expectations of faculty members are most important, and they understand that what is most important is what gets evaluated and measured. For this reason, faculty members must be centrally involved in developing curricular requirements and shaping clear learning goals for their own classes. Faculty members also must come to a shared understanding of the broad learning goals that cut across general education and major programs, and they must develop a common language to describe these goals.

To foster a climate of intentionality and convey to all students what an institution's overarching learning goals are, faculty members must be introduced to the goals before they are even hired. Additionally, they must have regular opportunities to engage in dialogue about overarching learning goals with colleagues—not only within their own departments, but also across departments, units, divisions, and schools.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- During the hiring process, are prospective faculty members told about your institution's commitment to liberal education? Are they given a clear sense of the overarching learning goals and expectations for all the students they would be teaching?
- Are candidates for faculty positions asked to describe their own understanding of liberal education outcomes and how they are developed in their field?
- Does your institution have an active and well-funded center for teaching and learning? Are its leaders in regular dialogue about learning goals with department chairs and deans?
- Do faculty members talk to students about their own learning goals and the larger learning goals of the institution? Are learning goals and the institution's commitment to liberal education made clear on course syllabi?
- Are there well-supported faculty development programs available to assist faculty in honing their teaching and assessment skills and to provide opportunities to discuss learning outcome priorities?
- In the tenure and promotion process, are faculty members' contributions to curriculum development and educational planning given significant weight?
- Does your institution have a clearly stated commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning as well as the scholarship of discovery? Are the expectations regarding the balance of teaching and research responsibilities made clear to tenure-track faculty?

MAKING EDUCATIONAL GOALS CLEAR

*Liberal Education and Course Syllabi—
An Initiative at the University of
Wisconsin – Oshkosh*

As part of its participation as a member of AAC&U's LEAP Campus Action Network, the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh has developed an initiative that encourages faculty to make explicit on their individual syllabi how their courses advance liberal education outcomes and connect with goals in other disciplines. Many faculty members have crafted statements included in their syllabi that speak directly to the importance of general and liberal education in relation to other disciplines and in the development of critical thinking across the curriculum.

For more information, see www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/liberal_art_integ.

4 Curriculum

Most students understand that the curriculum is at the very heart of the college experience. The messages embedded in curricular structures and requirements, therefore, are incredibly important to how students view what really matters in a college education. If students are presented with curricular choices simply as a disconnected series of requirements, it is unlikely that they will ever understand what the most important outcomes of college are. There are many ways to present curricular choices and requirements that will suggest to students that the curriculum is really a set of pathways to essential outcomes rather than just a series of hoops through which they must jump before receiving a credential.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- When students first enter the institution, do advisers make clear to them the relationship between general education requirements and their major requirements? Do advisers discuss the broad skills and capacities students will be expected to develop across their educational experiences—both in the classroom and beyond?
- Are there opportunities for students to discuss, in a classroom atmosphere, the aims of education and the rationale for both general education and major requirements?
- Is it made clear to students that all requirements—in general education and majors—are designed to foster the achievement of particular overarching learning outcomes?
- Do general education requirements link to requirements in the majors?
- If your institution is undergoing a general education review, are students involved in the process?
- Are new professors oriented to the history and goals of your general education program?
- Are there opportunities for cross-departmental dialogue about overarching learning goals and how they are developed first in general education and then in particular majors?
- Do faculty members make clear on their individual syllabi the specific liberal education learning goals that individual courses are designed to advance?
- Does your institution regularly survey students about their understanding of the curriculum and the learning goals it is designed to foster?
- Does your institution regularly survey students about how they actually experience the curriculum (e.g., in what order they actually take required courses)?

WHY DO I HAVE TO TAKE THIS COURSE? A Student Guide to Making Smart Educational Choices

By Robert Shoenberg

This practical guide for undergraduate students is intended to take some of the mystery out of curricular requirements and educate students about what really matters in college—the broad learning outcomes developed over the entire course of their undergraduate years. The ideas presented represent a consensus of contemporary thinking about the purposes of undergraduate education. This publication is particularly useful in first-year seminars and orientation programs.

To order, visit www.aacu.org.

5 Assessment

The single most powerful message students receive in college is that the most important outcomes are those that get measured. The ubiquitous question “will this be on the test?” is, in fact, a logical one. Students understand that some, but not all, tests have real consequences and, therefore, require their more serious attention. Developing a culture of evidence on your campus is essential both for responding to calls for accountability and for sending clear messages to students about the aims of education. Assessment approaches must help students understand that the development of transferable skills and the achievement of essential learning outcomes are what will be most important to their future success. Beyond a simple list of letter grades in a series of required courses, students should be given opportunities to demonstrate to their teachers, as well as to their future employers, what they have learned and what they can do as a result of their college experience.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- How comfortable are faculty on your campus with direct assessment of student learning outcomes, both in individual courses and in programs?
- Are faculty members introduced to a range of practices to assess student learning at various levels (formative, milestone, summative, direct, and indirect)?
- Are assessment practices directly linked to outcomes articulated by the institution and by individual departments and faculty members?
- Is the assessment of student learning fed back into a cycle of improvement so that results inform both curricular design and teaching practices?
- Is learning assessed in direct ways that supplement student evaluation of courses or faculty assignment of grades?
- How is learning that develops over time and across courses assessed?
- Are there culminating and integrative projects through which students can demonstrate their learning over time? Do these projects have real consequences for students? Do they involve public presentations that provide opportunities for others in the community to see students’ learning achievements “in action”?
- Does the campus have portfolios that help students document and reflect on their progress in achieving liberal education outcomes?
- Are summaries of students’ achievement of essential learning outcomes available for review by both internal and external constituents?

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES: EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

INDIANA UNIVERSITY–PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS

Faculty at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) have defined general education through six Principles of Undergraduate Learning that permeate the curricular and cocurricular learning experiences of all students. Students are introduced to these principles as soon as they enter the institution and are reminded of them often as they progress through their studies. These principles articulate learning outcomes important for every educated citizen of a global society. The goal of the principles is to guarantee every student opportunities to improve and achieve core communication and quantitative skills; critical thinking; integration and application of knowledge; intellectual depth, breadth, and adaptiveness; understanding of society and culture; and values and ethics. At IUPUI students build electronic portfolios to provide evidence that they have mastered the educational goals. Included in the portfolios are carefully chosen pieces of work at introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels of each principle, as well as evidence of experiential learning. The matrix of evidence thereby created documents individual student progress over time. Further information may be found at www.eport.iu.edu.

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE

Students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville complete a senior assignment in the major meant to cap disciplinary as well as general education learning. Designed by department faculty to “make visible” the learning required for the degree—whether it occurs in the major program or in general education—the assignments are generally assessed using rubrics aligned with the desired outcomes that probe for several different kinds of evidence. Individual students receive feedback on their accomplishments while the data also serve at the program level to shape curricular and pedagogical improvements. The process of collectively designing and scoring senior assignments has improved the culture of faculty collaboration and helped improve communication with students and among faculty about shared goals for learning outcomes. For more information, see www.siue.edu/assessment.

AAC&U RESOURCES ON ASSESSMENT

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF ASSESSING GENERAL EDUCATION OUTCOMES: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

This guide offers recommendations for individuals involved with the assessment of general education programs. It includes a step-by-step assessment checklist, tips for better assessment, and examples of assessment methods.

LEVELS OF ASSESSMENT: FROM THE STUDENT TO THE INSTITUTION

This paper describes five levels of complexity in assessment at the college level, from assessing individual student learning up to assessing the institution. The premise of the paper is that direct measures of student learning can be used for multiple levels of assessment and that the ways of sampling, aggregating, and grouping data depend on the original questions posed.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE QUALITY OF THE BACCALAUREATE DEGREE

This monograph describes the emerging consensus among educational leaders about liberal learning outcomes. Authors discuss the connections between general education and the major in achieving these essential outcomes, while offering examples of their assessment in a variety of institutional settings.

ADVANCING LIBERAL EDUCATION: ASSESSMENT PRACTICES ON CAMPUS

This publication presents the stories of six different colleges and universities that have developed innovative programs to advance liberal education outcomes. These stories—which focus on writing, information literacy, understanding of diversity, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and civic engagement—offer models for effective assessment practices.

To order these publications and for links to additional resources, see www.aacu.org/issues/assessment.

6 External Relations

More now than ever, colleges and universities are influenced by values and trends in their external environments. And nothing could be more important to a college's success than the preparation its students receive in their K–12 educational experiences. The changing world of work will also have a profound effect on the professional success of today's college students. State and federal policy makers are taking a far more active interest and regulatory role in academic issues on campus. For these reasons, it is imperative that college educators—faculty and academic leaders alike—take a far more active role in educating external constituents about what really matters in college today.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- In what structured ways do your institution and its educational leaders work with elementary and secondary schools to improve student awareness about and preparation for a challenging liberal education?
- In what ways does your institution involve its local community in achieving the desired educational outcomes? Are there regular opportunities for campus leaders and faculty members to discuss with community leaders what outcomes are most important for success in today's world?
- In what ways are local business leaders consulted about the learning goals the institution advances? How does the institution keep abreast of changes in the world of work so its students are well prepared to succeed in their professional lives? Are all colleges, programs, and departments on your campus involved in these efforts to assess the changing world of work?
- In what ways do leaders from your institution help to educate policy makers and local legislators about the important outcomes of college and the ways your institution advances them?
- Has your institution created strategic alliances, working with other colleges and universities, to streamline offerings and provide better services focused intentionally on your institution's most important goals?
- Do your graduates help to communicate about the value of the learning they received—to current and prospective students and to potential employers in your region?

Contributing to the National Dialogue: Ways to Add Your Voice

BECOME A REGIONAL LEADER

Join with other campuses in your area and agree to take the lead in the region, providing public leadership, visibility, and host sites for outreach.

CONDUCT AN INTERNAL REVIEW AND SET PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

Use this guide to assess how well your institution is conveying its goals and values and how well it is providing a liberal education to all students. Publicize the results of the study to internal and external constituents.

GUIDE AND ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING ACROSS TIME

Use liberal education outcomes as a framework for student planning and progressive assessments of student learning gains. Share results of these assessments and the common framework for assessment.

REACH OUT TO UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

Students who would benefit most from liberal education practices and outcomes are often least likely to be aware of these practices and their importance. Take the lead in developing programs designed specifically for these students through which they can discover their own self-interest in achieving these important outcomes.

CONNECT LIBERAL EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

Bring employers and recent graduates to campus to discuss learning outcomes and the needs of the new global workplace with students and faculty.

TELL COMPELLING STUDENT AND CAMPUS STORIES

Provide examples of promising practices or success stories in students' and graduates' own words to AAC&U and others for national dissemination. Use these stories in local publications and publicity materials.

7 Web Sites

Web sites have become the most important sources of information about colleges and universities—in addition to their primary face to the world. In order to find information or to learn about what really matters at a given college or university, nearly everyone on a campus, as well as any prospective student, will go first to the Web site.

Complex and dynamic communication tools, Web sites present a significant challenge. In order to ensure that the campus Web site is sending a coherent and up-to-date message, it is essential that those responsible for overseeing it communicate regularly with senior academic leadership.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Who is responsible for the home page of your campus Web site? Is that person in regular dialogue with academic and student affairs leaders on your campus so that the Web site can accurately reflect changes in campus priorities and focus clearly on what is most important—student learning?
- Is your institution's commitment to, and definition of, liberal education clear on the home page? Is the term "liberal education" or the phrase "liberal learning outcomes" used on the home page and in all the various other sections of the site dealing with academics and requirements?
- Do the individuals responsible for departmental and division Web pages meet regularly to ensure that each component of the institution's Web site reinforces the essential messages about learning the campus wants to convey?
- When students visit Web pages related to your institution's curricular requirements, do they find only lists of required courses? Or do they also get a picture of what their various learning experiences—both in the classroom and beyond—are designed to cumulatively accomplish for them?
- Are you using your Web site to convey the results of cumulative assessments of students' achievement of essential learning outcomes?

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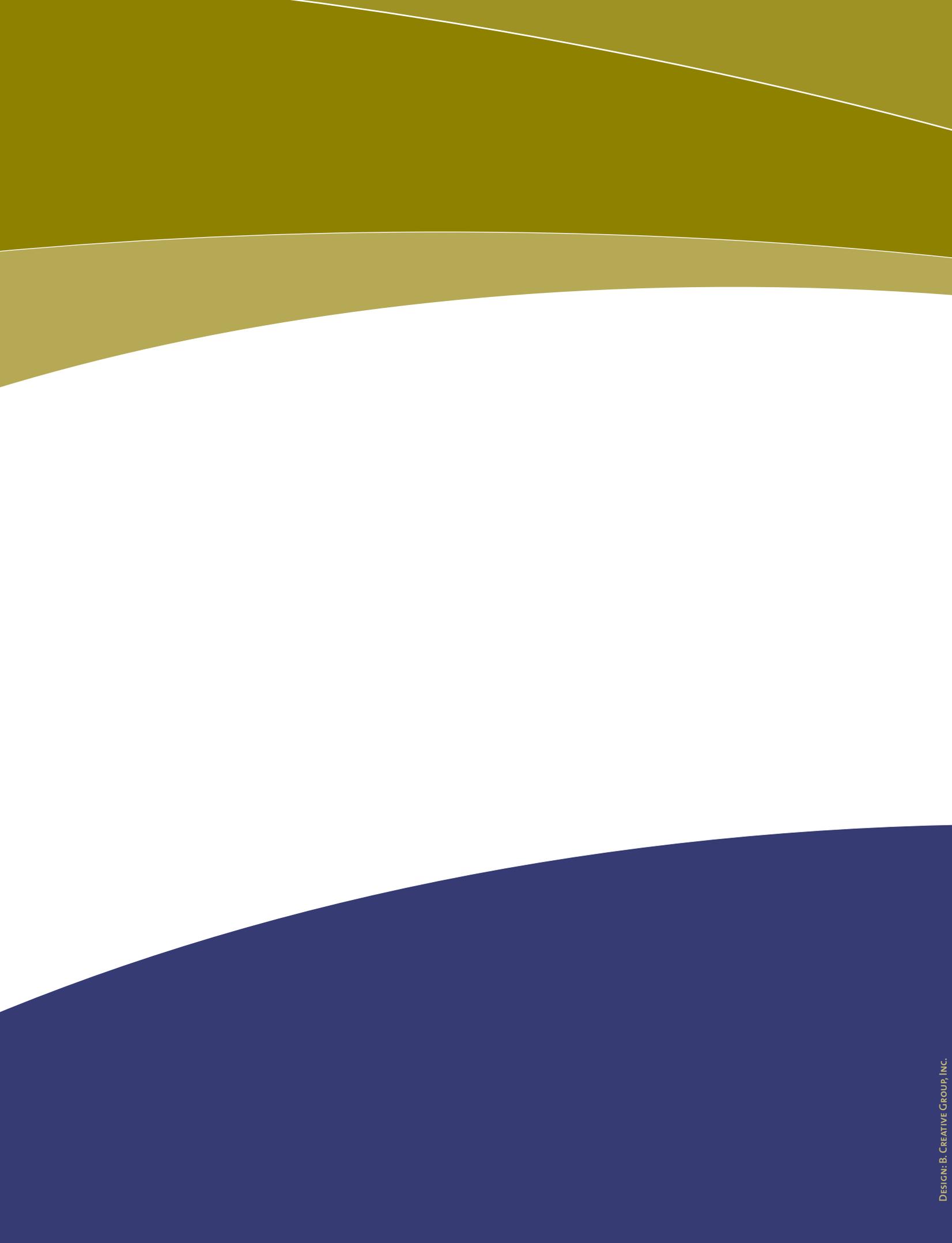
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AAC&U IS THE LEADING NATIONAL ASSOCIATION concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,100 accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U FUNCTIONS AS A CATALYST AND FACILITATOR, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

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