

# Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence

A CAMPUS GUIDE FOR SELF-STUDY AND PLANNING





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of American  
Colleges and  
Universities*

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# Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: A Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning

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

– THE QUALITY IMPERATIVE (AAC&U BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2010)

For generations, the United States has promised universal access to opportunity. It’s part of our history and the engine of our economic and civic prosperity. But opportunity in America continues to be disproportionately distributed. The effects of this imbalance are evident. We have deep and persistent gaps in education, income, and wealth, and these gaps are widening as our nation becomes more diverse. As a result, the middle class is shrinking, and the fastest-growing segments of our population are the least likely to have the opportunities they need to succeed.

Expanding access to quality education is key to making opportunity real for all. It is key to closing America’s deepening divides, strengthening the middle class, and ensuring our nation’s vitality. Yet, at all levels of US education, there are entrenched practices that reinforce inequities—and that lead to vastly different outcomes for low-income students and for students of color. We are failing the very students who must become our future leaders and citizens.

In fact, US higher education is falling seriously behind in meeting the country’s need for citizens and workers with postsecondary learning and sought-after skills. This needed talent must come from precisely the segments of US society that the American educational system has underserved—in the past and to this day.

By 2027, 49 percent of high school seniors will be students of color. Yet, historically and today, African American, Latino/a, and Native American students are notably less likely than students from other racial and ethnic groups to enter and complete college.<sup>1</sup> In addition, only 9 percent of students in the lowest income quartile complete a bachelor’s degree by age twenty-four. As increasingly large numbers of high-income students complete college, the equity divides in US college attainment have deepened dramatically.<sup>2</sup>

Higher education has a role to play in addressing this issue. It is our responsibility to the students we serve as well as to our democracy and the nation’s economy. It is time for higher education to step up and lead for equity and inclusive excellence.

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1. Keith Witham, Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux, Alicia C. Dowd, and Estela Mara Bensimon, *America’s Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).

2. Margaret Cahalan and Laura Perna, *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States* (Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education and PennAhead, 2015), 31.

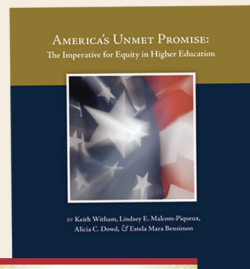


## Using This Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning

To serve students and society well, higher education will need to make a pervasive commitment to equity and inclusive excellence—both preparing students for and providing them with access to high-quality learning opportunities, and ensuring that students of color and low-income students participate in the most empowering forms of college learning.

This *Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning* is part of a series of publications and activities designed to advance equity and inclusive excellence. It provides a framework for needed dialogue, self-assessment, and action. It can be used by campus educators as a tool for bringing leaders and educators together across divisions and departments to engage in an internal assessment process and to conduct necessary dialogues, all aimed at charting a path forward to improve all students' success and learning. The *Guide* is designed with particular attention to helping campus leaders and practitioners focus on the success of students who come from groups who traditionally have been underserved in higher education.

This guide is part of a series of documents and resources that have been, or will be, released throughout AAC&U's Centennial year. All the documents in this series build on the work and resources developed through AAC&U's signature initiative **Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)**.



### Other AAC&U Resources on Equity and Inclusive Excellence

**America's Unmet Promise:  
The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education**



**Step Up and Lead for Equity:  
What Higher Education Can Do to Reverse Our  
Deepening Divides**



**The LEAP Challenge:  
Education for a World of Unscripted Problems**

To order these publications, and to see campus examples and other campus tools, see: [www.aacu.org/diversity/publications](http://www.aacu.org/diversity/publications).

## PART I. Committing to Equity and the Expansion of Opportunity

To create the educational equity that US society needs, higher education leaders need to ask:

*Where is my institution in relation to each of the following?*

### 1. Knowing who your students are and will be

- What demographic shifts and trends in postsecondary success are occurring on your campus and in the regions from which you draw students?

*Study the evidence about demographic shifts among your future students and postsecondary success rates at your institution.*

- What success or lack of success has your institution had in enrolling and educating students from underserved communities?

*Examine your institution's history and identify related challenges and opportunities.*

- How is your institution defining student success?

*Recognize that student success must mean much more than completing college and meeting a minimum GPA. (See Part II, below.)*

- How are you ensuring that precollegiate students know what will be expected in college?

*Consider expanding your P-12 partnerships to strengthen underserved students' preparation and to encourage enrollment in college.*

- How are you bringing equity-minded<sup>3</sup> commitments to each of the goals outlined below?

*Make equity-mindedness an explicit goal across the institution's reform efforts.*

### 2. Committing to frank, hard dialogues about the climate for underserved students on your campus, with the goal of effecting a paradigm shift in language and actions

- Who is enrolling and succeeding at your institution, and who is not? What benchmarks are you using to determine success?

*Engage stakeholders on your campus with evidence of whether and how your institution is achieving its equity goals. (See Part II, below.)*

- How does your institution value and use the cultural capital of underserved students? How can the campus community affirm these students' strengths? What biases or stereotypes may be standing in the way?

*Examine attitudes about underserved student success that may hinder or advance your institution's ability to support these students.*

- What do your students' own stories tell you about the work you need to do?

*Bring students as well as faculty and staff into the dialogue regarding institutional change.*

- How are your institution's practices and policies designed to accommodate differences in students' contexts for their learning? How do you ensure that underserved students receive the appropriate amount of challenge and support to ensure their success, without marginalizing these students? What can you learn from your own successes and failures and from other institutions working to increase underserved student success?

*Recognize that different students need different kinds of support for their learning, and identify the best ways to provide the specific supports that different students need.*

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3. For an explanation of the term "equity-minded," see Estela Mara Bensimon, "The Underestimated Significance of Practitioner Knowledge in the Scholarship of Student Success," *Review of Higher Education* 30, no. 4 (2007): 441-69.

### 3. Investing in culturally competent practices that lead to the success of underserved students—and of all students

- Who at your institution or in your region is already leading—or struggling to be heard—on equity and inclusion issues?

*Identify where investments in equity and inclusion are already being made, and connect new efforts with those that are already established.*

- Who else needs to be included in the conversation about culturally competent practices? Are all faculty at your institution engaged in supporting underserved students?

*Frame the conversation inclusively, with a wide range of stakeholders.*

- How are your faculty and staff developing cultural competence so that they are prepared to teach all of today's diverse students?

*Braid your equity programs into ongoing orientation for all faculty and staff. Include and support contingent faculty as well as tenure-track faculty.*

- How is your institution investing in leadership for equity?

*Commit to a systematic program of equity-minded leadership development for curricular and cocurricular change, including expansion of school-to-college pathways.*

### 4. Setting and monitoring equity-minded goals—and devoting aligned resources to achieve them

- How is your institution defining success?

*Define success in terms of access to inclusive excellence. (See Part II, below.)*

- How is your institution measuring progress?

*Hold the institution accountable for progress on four levels: outreach and access, completion and transfer, engaged or high-impact learning, and demonstrated achievement.*

- How are you engaging faculty, staff, and students with evidence on all four levels of progress?

*Work with a broad set of stakeholders to disaggregate data, question assumptions, and identify areas where new efforts are needed.*

- How are you ensuring that current equity and opportunity programs on your campus are integrated and working toward shared goals?

*Foster dialogue across discrete programs. Develop a unified strategy.*

- How are you ensuring alignment between academic and social support programs for students?

*Involve both academic affairs and student affairs staff in your equity and inclusive excellence efforts.*

- How are you aligning your institution's equity goals with its financial goals?

*Determine financial parameters, do a cost/benefit analysis, and set a budget. Investment in underserved student success can produce higher retention and potentially reduce tuition replacement costs.*

## PART II. Committing to Inclusive Excellence

The United States is in the midst of a long-term shift from defining “success” in terms of credits and grades to ensuring that students are well prepared for a complex world and an innovation-fueled economy. This shift has direct implications for what it means to demonstrate progress in advancing educational equity. It requires educators to ask whether underserved students are experiencing the most empowering forms of learning and whether they are successfully achieving the knowledge, adaptive skills, and hands-on experiences that prepare them to apply their learning to new settings, emergent problems, and evolving roles.

To ensure that all students achieve the educational outcomes they need for twenty-first-century success, higher education leaders need to ask: *Where is my institution in relation to the following components of a framework for quality and inclusive excellence?*

### 5. Developing and actively pursuing a clear vision and goals for achieving the high-quality learning necessary to careers and to citizenship, and therefore essential to the degree

- Do you have in place a quality framework for associate- and/or baccalaureate-level work that sets clear standards for students’ development of the following Essential Learning Outcomes?  
*Colleges and systems should have a quality framework that supports students’ development of these outcomes:*
  - broad and integrative knowledge of histories, cultures, science, and society;
  - well-honed intellectual and adaptive skills, including analytic inquiry, communication fluency, quantitative fluency, engaging and working across difference, problem solving, and ethical reasoning;
  - in-depth engagement with unscripted problems relevant to both work (likely pursued through the student’s major) and citizenship, US and global;
  - Signature Work that shows the results of each student’s efforts related to a problem or project, extending over at least a semester. Signature Work may include students’ research, practicums, community service, portfolios, or other experiential learning. (See 6, below.)
- Do student learning strategies value students’ own cultural contexts and support their engagement with cultural diversity?  
*Tie each of the above outcomes to your students’ own cultural contexts and make engagement with society and societal diversity a fundamental and intentional part of high-quality learning.*
- Are active and collaborative learning opportunities scaffolded across the curriculum?  
*Ensure that all students are working each term on inquiry, analysis, projects, presentations, and other forms of active, collaborative learning.*
- Does your institution have an infrastructure for supporting student transfer?  
*In public institutions and systems, create alignment between educational programs to foster transfer.*
- How do you engage your students, including underserved students, with understanding your quality framework for student learning?  
*Communicate intentionally with students about the Essential Learning Outcomes they should expect to achieve while earning their degrees.*

## 6. Expecting and preparing all students to produce culminating or Signature Work <sup>4</sup> at the associate (or sophomore) and baccalaureate level to show their achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes, and monitoring data to ensure equitable participation and achievement among underserved students

- Where in the curriculum do students pursue Signature Work?  
*Build both culminating work and preparation for it into general education and majors. Create platforms and practices for supporting students' Signature Work at all levels.*
- When do students begin planning for their Signature Work?  
*Begin at entrance to help students engage in problem-centered inquiry and identify problems or questions of special interest.*
- Do students have multiple opportunities to engage in cross-disciplinary inquiry?  
*Provide at least one experience of cross-disciplinary inquiry at the associate or sophomore level and additional experiences for juniors and seniors.*
- Is Signature Work an expectation for all students, not just traditional-age students?  
*Ensure that programs for working adults and other older students require and prepare students to achieve Signature Work.*
- How are you scaling up the number of academic programs that support Signature Work?  
*Provide leadership to engage faculty in academic programs where Signature Work is an emerging idea.*

## 7. Providing support to help students develop guided plans to achieve Essential Learning Outcomes, prepare for and complete Signature Work, and connect college with careers

- How does advising support your institution's goals for student learning?  
*Faculty and staff advisors should help students plan individualized courses of study that are keyed to their goals, attentive to their life contexts, and designed to help them achieve the intended Essential Learning Outcomes.*
- How do your developmental and gatekeeper courses empower students to succeed in college?  
*Focus the pedagogies and structures of developmental and gatekeeper courses to encourage students' academic self-direction and engage various learning styles.*
- Are the connections between completion goals and goals for achieving Essential Learning Outcomes transparent to students?  
*Help students develop a plan for learning and demonstrated accomplishment, not just for timely course completion.*
- How do students pursue these Essential Learning Outcomes in ways that are meaningful to them?  
*Provide faculty guidance for students to identify and explore questions and problems significant to their own goals and interests.*
- How are you using data analytics to support students as they pursue learning goals, including the achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes?  
*Track students' progress and provide proactive guidance to help students advance in their learning plans and/or adjust course as needed.*

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4. Signature Work might be research, a significant project, a portfolio showing student work on a particular topic, a senior capstone assignment, a practicum, or another form of creative student work. Through Signature Work, students prepare across their college studies to produce a significant applied learning project that reflects their interests and shows what they can successfully do with their learning. For more information, see *The LEAP Challenge: Education for a World of Unscripted Problems* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).



## 8. Identifying high-impact practices (HIPs) best suited to your students and your institution's quality framework of Essential Learning Outcomes, and working proactively to ensure equitable student participation in HIPs<sup>5</sup>

- Are your students participating equitably in HIPs?  
*Collect and disaggregate data on who is participating in selected HIPs (service learning, research, internships, capstones, learning communities, etc.). Work systemically to address inequities in students' experiences of high-impact and empowering learning.*
- Do HIPs provide scaffolding for students' Signature Work?  
*Tie participation in selected HIPs to students' preparation for and achievement of Signature Work.*
- Are HIPs integral to students' educational experiences wherever those experiences occur, whether on campus, off campus, or online?  
*Ensure that online learning programs equitably include high-impact practices and emphasize students' active, hands-on learning.*

## 9. Ensuring that Essential Learning Outcomes are addressed and high-impact practices are incorporated across all programs, including general education, the majors, digital learning platforms, and cocurricular or community-based programs<sup>6</sup>

- What is the role of your general education program in helping students achieve the Essential Learning Outcomes associated with high-quality learning?  
*Redesign general education, which all students take, to directly address quality learning goals and to involve students in active learning from first to final year of college.*
- What is the role of the majors in helping students achieve the Essential Learning Outcomes associated with high-quality learning?  
*Review and amend major programs to address degree-level goals in ways appropriate to students' fields of study. Start first with the programs most commonly selected by underserved students.*
- How do certificate programs support and align with these goals?  
*Where certificate programs are offered, align them with relevant degree requirements and show students what will be required to move from certificate to degree.*
- How does your institution support faculty and staff across programs as they incorporate high-impact practices into their work?  
*Provide professional development opportunities that help faculty and staff create strategies for designing and implementing quality high-impact practices that are tied to student achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes.*
- How does your institution recognize student learning achieved outside of credit-bearing courses?  
*Consider assessing prior and experiential learning (e.g., military service, work, and civic service) in relation to Essential Learning Outcomes, thereby encouraging students to make faster progress to degrees.*

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5. For information about high-impact practices and their effects on student learning, see <http://www.aacu.org/resources/high-impact-practices>.

6. For guidance on mapping degree-level learning outcome goals to general education, majors, and programs, see the Degree Qualifications Profile (Indianapolis: Lumina Foundation 2014).

## 10. Making student achievement—including underserved student achievement—visible and valued

- Does your institution regularly assess student achievement and report findings to stakeholders in a way that recognizes multiple aspects of student growth?

*Assess students' achievement of expected Essential Learning Outcomes and report regularly to faculty and staff, trustees, and other stakeholders. Assessment practices should be growth-oriented and include data on noncognitive factors to measure student development holistically.*

- Does your institution track and respond to data on student achievement to ensure that it is equitable across different student groups?

*Disaggregate data on students' progress toward completion or transfer and on demonstrated achievement of expected Essential Learning Outcomes, and take action to improve students' progress and achievement as needed.*

- How are you communicating your priorities and successes?

*Develop your institution's capacity to tell the story—to an institutional, regional, and national audience—of what an empowering education looks like in the twenty-first century, and why it matters for underserved students.*

- How are you involving community stakeholders in this work?

*Develop and expand partnerships with nonprofit organizations and with employers to reinforce commitments to making excellence inclusive for all students—traditional-age students and working adult learners; students of all racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds; and students of all income levels.*

## Liberal Education and America’s Promise



**Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP)** is a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that champions the importance of a twenty-first-century liberal education—for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality.

LEAP responds to the changing demands of the twenty-first century—demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens. Today, and in the years to come, college graduates need higher levels of learning and knowledge as well as strong intellectual and practical skills to navigate this more demanding environment successfully and responsibly.

Launched in 2005, LEAP challenges the traditional practice of providing liberal education to some students and narrow training to others. In 2015, AAC&U launched the **LEAP Challenge** calling on colleges and universities to engage students in Signature Work that will prepare them to integrate and apply their learning to a significant project.

For more information, see [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).

## About AAC&U

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (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 1,300 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive 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 and inclusive excellence 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.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).



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