

AAC&U Statement on the Lumina Foundation for Education's Proposed Degree Qualifications Profile

APPROVED BY THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

JANUARY 2011



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AAC&U STATEMENT ON THE LUMINA FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION'S
PROPOSED DEGREE QUALIFICATIONS PROFILE

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** *There will be several opportunities during the AAC&U annual meeting in San Francisco to learn more about and to discuss the Lumina Foundation for Education’s Degree Qualifications Profile (see conference program for details). The full text of the Proposed Degree Qualifications Profile is available online at www.luminafoundation.org.*

For more than a decade, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has worked with its members to define the kinds of learning college graduates need to contribute and thrive in a turbulent global century. AAC&U also has consistently decried what we have called a dangerous public and policy silence about the actual content of student learning, a silence that has allowed entirely too many students to settle, often unwittingly, for subprime programs of study.¹

Recently, AAC&U’s president has expressed particular concern at the headlong rush to embrace faux reforms that focus only on the number of degrees completed and heedlessly to propose “fixes” to college study—such as a three-year or even a two-year BA—that, if widely adopted, would almost certainly narrow rather than expand students’ knowledge of global, historical, scientific, and democratic issues and questions.² Americans need to recognize that the quality of student achievement in college is the real key to future opportunity—for students and for our society.

As a community, and especially through its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, AAC&U has responded to the widespread confusion about what matters in college by identifying and actively promoting four fundamental strategies for raising student achievement. These include:

- **Essential Learning Outcomes**—clear descriptions of the knowledge, skills, responsibilities, and applied learning that college graduates will need as thoughtful people, as democratic and global citizens, and for economic opportunity and success. The LEAP essential learning outcomes are strongly supported by educators and employers alike.³

1. AAC&U, *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2007), 7–10.

2. Carol Geary Schneider, “Real Reform, Faux Reform: Facing the Cost of the ‘Throughput’ Follies,” *Liberal Education* 96, no. 1 (2010): 2–3; Schneider, “The Three-Year Degree Is No Silver Bullet,” June 3, 2010, <http://www.aacu.org/about/statements/2010/threeyears.cfm>; Schneider, “General Education 1.0: An Efficiency Overhaul for the Cold War Curriculum,” *Liberal Education* 96, no. 4 (2010): 2–3.

3. Hart Research Associates, *Learning and Assessment: Trends in Undergraduate Education* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2010); Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers’ Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2010); see also AAC&U, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, 53n53.

- **High-Impact Practices**—teaching and learning strategies that move students’ own high-effort engagement to the center of educational focus and assessment. The recommended practices yield special benefits for students from underserved communities, in terms of both college completion and achievement.⁴
- **Authentic Assessments**—the use of students’ actual work, assessed at milestone points as students progress in college, to determine their level of competence on the essential learning outcomes. These forms of assessment challenge students to present their best work, rather than only grades and the number of credit hours earned, as the basis for their college degrees. Assessments of students’ authentic work can be sampled and summarized for external reporting.⁵
- **Inclusive Excellence**—a commitment to ensure that *all* students, not just some students, are guided and helped to achieve a liberating and empowering education. “Inclusive excellence” is another name for what Americans have, since the eighteenth century, termed a *liberal education*, the kind of learning that prepares the individual to use freedom wisely in all spheres of life.⁶

Across all these strategies, AAC&U has strongly underscored the importance of integrative learning. Integrative learners draw from multiple disciplines and multiple sites, societal as well as academic, to investigate and tackle complex questions—contemporary questions, such as those we face in the economy and the environment, and enduring questions about our hopes, fears, values, and aspirations. Integrative learning, we have often affirmed, is the distinctive twenty-first-century liberal art.⁷

Lumina’s Proposed Degree Qualifications Profile

Given these commitments and our concerns about policy priorities that emphasize completion over quality, AAC&U warmly welcomes the recent decision of the Lumina Foundation for Education to create and test a “Degree Qualifications Profile” that defines US degrees at the associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s levels in terms of what students know and can do with their knowledge.

AAC&U’s president was one of the primary authors of the proposed Degree Profile. (The complete Degree Qualifications Profile can be found online at: www.luminafoundation.org.)

Lumina leaders intend to “beta-test” the proposed Degree Profile through pilot projects across the United States, involving policy organizations as well as individual institutions and disciplines. The foundation will work with the higher education community to learn from these experiments and to develop a final recommended Degree Profile that reflects the shared insights of faculty, administrators, staff, students, employers, policy leaders, and the public.⁸

4. George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington DC: AAC&U, 2008); Jayne E. Brownell and Lynn E. Swaner, *Five High-Impact Practices: Research on Learning Outcomes, Completion, and Quality* (Washington DC: AAC&U, 2010).

5. AAC&U, *Our Students’ Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2008); Helen L. Chen and Tracy Penny Light, *Electronic Portfolios and Student Success: Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Learning* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2010).

6. AAC&U, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, 49–50.

7. Carol Geary Schneider, “From the President,” *Peer Review* 10, no. 4 (2008), 3.

8. Lumina senior staff, personal communication to authors of the Degree Qualifications Profile, December 2010.

AAC&U leaders, staff, and (we trust) our 1,200 college and university members will work with Lumina in this game-changing effort to set expected standards for the meaning of the degree—standards that apply across all of higher education, both at the policy level and, most importantly, in the interaction of faculty and students in postsecondary teaching and learning. We embrace with particular enthusiasm the effort to bring associate’s degrees of all kinds into a shared framework that anticipates and lays a foundation for work at the bachelor’s and master’s degree levels. The invidious distinctions at the associate’s level between career and technical programs, on the one hand, and college transfer programs, on the other, have long been outmoded and ought finally to be abolished. The Degree Profile represents a much-needed commitment to set and achieve greater expectations for all learners, whatever their background or pathway to and through college.

AAC&U believes this is the right time to move examinations of the meaning of the degree to a new level of shared focus. The existing “standards” that guide our enterprise are based mainly on credit hours, which signify time spent in formal courses: the accumulation of 60 or 120 credit hours merits a degree. This may have made sense when it was introduced a century ago, but the credit-hour approach is seriously out of touch with society’s current need for graduates who can adapt and expand existing knowledge and skills to meet new challenges and unscripted problems in every sphere of life—personal, economic, civic, democratic, environmental, global.

Americans in all enterprises—technical, scientific, transnational, local—need a big-picture understanding of the forces that shape our world, an understanding that is best developed when the college curriculum includes a coherent program of study in the arts and sciences. Americans also need well-developed intellectual and practical skills that they can use in any sphere of endeavor—civic, economic, cross-cultural, personal. The Degree Profile provides a roadmap for how students can develop and demonstrate this knowledge and these skills across all major fields.

The Degree Profile and the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes

Hundreds of colleges and universities already are using AAC&U’s recommended essential learning outcomes for their own work on curricular reform, effective teaching and learning, and meaningful assessments. Many will wonder how the Lumina Degree Profile relates to the LEAP initiative and especially to the essential learning outcomes. Following are some answers to questions that AAC&U members and others are likely to ask.

Q: How are the competencies articulated in the Degree Profile related to those set forth in the AAC&U statement of essential learning outcomes and liberal education?

A: Closely. The competencies articulated in the Degree Profile all are addressed in the LEAP essential learning outcomes. The commitments to broad as well as specialized knowledge, to strong intellectual skills, to civic learning, and to applied learning are shared across both frameworks. Equally important, the Degree Profile affirms that these competencies need to be fostered across all fields of study—arts and sciences, career or occupational, and technical. Both frameworks also affirm that these competencies should be developed from the associate’s to the bachelor’s degree, while the Degree Profile includes master’s degree as well.

Q: What does the Degree Profile provide that is new and important?

A: The Degree Profile takes the learning outcomes effort to the next level by showing how essential competencies or outcomes are developed across progressively higher degree levels, from associate’s to bachelor’s to master’s. It creates a shared framework for high standards—without standardization—that emphasizes the cumulative and integrative quality of higher learning. By differentiating between competencies expected at the associate’s and bachelor’s levels, it also sets a context for clarifying the muddled pathway from high school into college.

Q: Outcomes are only one part of AAC&U’s recent work on the quality of learning. How does the Degree Profile relate to the other dimensions of quality outlined above?

A: The Degree Profile encourages many practices that AAC&U regards as priorities, including

- intentionality across the entire educational experience to foster the learning outcomes all students need;
- inclusion of all students, especially first-generation and adult students, in the vision of excellence;
- integration of learning across multiple disciplines and sites of learning, including community-based learning;
- affirmation of the importance of broad education in the arts and sciences, now repositioned as the broad contextual knowledge students need to probe the implications of their more specialized interests;
- application of learning to complex, unscripted questions and real-world problems;
- civic learning as a sine qua non for the credit-bearing college curriculum;
- recognition of the centrality of students’ own work—including, for example, projects, research, and creative productions—to assessment, accountability, and certification of achievement.

Q: What needs not met by AAC&U’s work—and other such statements on learning outcomes—does the Degree Profile address?

A: The LEAP essential learning outcomes express desired objectives. The Degree Profile seeks to further the accomplishment of such objectives by articulating assessable expectations of performance for each degree level in ways that honor the importance of faculty judgment. Further, the Degree Profile is meant to offer a basis for consensus among representatives of many different constituencies, including policy and accreditation leaders. Agreement on what US degrees mean would provide a stable, easily understood platform for increased performance and accountability in higher education.

Q: Isn't the Degree Profile primarily influenced by the so-called Bologna Process in Europe rather than by American examples?

A: The idea of a shared qualifications framework, outlined at progressively more challenging levels, was certainly pioneered in Europe. However, the US Degree Profile differs markedly from European models in that it strongly emphasizes broad, integrative knowledge (or general education) and argues that such knowledge needs to be developed and integrated *in concert with* specialized learning, not merely as a preface to specialized learning. Multidisciplinarity has always been a US signature. By emphasizing students' ability to use more than one disciplinary framework for problem investigation and analysis, the Degree Profile makes cross-disciplinarity a distinctive strength of US higher educational excellence. In addition, the US Degree Profile is unique internationally in spelling out the role that higher education plays in preparing students for thoughtful citizenship, at home and abroad.

Q: Does AAC&U see anything missing from the Degree Profile?

A: The LEAP essential learning outcomes place strong emphasis on ethical reasoning and action. Seventy-five percent of AAC&U members and 75 percent of the employers surveyed for AAC&U consider ethical reasoning an important component of college learning.⁹ We hope that ethical reasoning will eventually be added to the expected framework for US degrees.

Q: What comes next?

A: The Degree Profile marks a further stage in a long-term change from counting course credits to developing American competence and capability on a scale that is both needed and unprecedented. The full meaning of outcomes reform will emerge in the context of active efforts, across all institutions and all fields of study, to ensure that students engage, practice, and demonstrably achieve the high levels of knowledge, skill, and responsible application of liberal learning that a complex global era plainly requires.

9. See note 3.



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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 1,200 member institutions—including 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.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at www.aacu.org.