

# Bologna Plus: The Liberal Education Advantage

FOR MUCH OF THE PAST DECADE, many in higher education were intensely focused on responding to one perturbing idea after another as they emerged from either from the Higher Education Act Reauthorization process or from Secretary Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Collectively, we shared a near-term focus born of necessity.

With this issue of *Liberal Education*, we shift gears and take a wider and longer view of the academy's future. The near-term, of course, remains deeply unsettling as the economic crisis deepens. We face difficult times ahead. But this reality makes it doubly important to focus with new determination on the qualities that have made American higher education both strong and resilient. And a more global view brings both our strengths and their corresponding implications into even clearer focus.

While the Spellings Commission paid lip service to the new globalized environment, its re-

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port gave very little attention either to trends in higher education in other parts of the world or

to the ways in which globalization is, or should be, changing how we educate the next generation. As is often the case, a wider view presents lessons on what we should do and also on what we should avoid doing at the local or national levels here in the United States.

Cliff Adelman's careful examination of the Bologna Process in Europe, for example, presents in these pages a useful set of ideas for how we might address issues of student mobility, access, assessment, and transparency. We are all in Cliff's debt for helping to make transparent an important set of developments. Paul Gaston's companion article reminds us, however, that the long-standing strengths of the *American* system of higher education should not be abandoned even as we consider whether the Bologna Process holds useful implications for U.S. higher education.

America's tradition of providing a liberal education to students at the college level, and not just in precollegiate studies, is more important than ever in this turbulent global era. The educational vision that AAC&U has been working with our members to develop builds on the enduring aims of American liberal education: broad knowledge, strong intellectual skills, a grounded sense of ethical and social responsibility. But—and this is equally important—the essential learning outcomes articulated in AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative also work to connect liberal education directly with the economic realities and societal challenges that shape our world.

Informed by a wider view of the changing nature of work and the increasingly interdependent global environment, the LEAP vision for student learning places strong emphasis on global and intercultural learning, technological sophistication, collaborative problem solving, transferable skills, and real-world applications—both civic and job-related. In all these emphases, LEAP repositions liberal education, no longer as just an option for the fortunate few, but rather as the

most practical and powerful preparation for “success” in all its meanings: economic, societal, civic, and personal. This vision builds from the historical strengths of American higher education. But, by integrating and applying learning across disciplines, it also engages a new era and new realities.

Some will point to the greater precision—criterion-referenced standards for specific disciplines—that is being attempted through the Bologna Process with its “tuning” of cross-national degree requirements. But the Bologna Process does not promise European students an integrative, cross-disciplinary *liberal* education that is clearly tied to the responsibilities of democratic and global citizenship. Absent that promise, both its vision and its precision are insufficient.

The Bologna Process has been driven by two overarching economic concerns—the need for greater mobility of students and workers and the need for all workers to have much higher levels of skills and abilities. But a clear understanding of the demands of a knowledge economy makes an American-style liberal education, with its emphasis on cross-disciplinary learning, economically indispensable. Virtually in chorus, employers emphasize the need for students to achieve cross-cutting skills and multidisciplinary knowledge. Whatever the major, employers want students to arrive on the job with global understanding and competence, and an examined set of ethical values. They also seek assurance that students can apply their learning to real-world problems, which almost by definition are multidisciplinary. AAC&U’s employer research shows that four out of five employers want students to get a well-rounded education, with only one in five preferring that student focus mainly on a specific field of study at the college level.

Over the long term, this nation’s future depends on higher education’s capacity to bring much higher numbers of students to significantly higher levels of achievement. This global era certainly requires that students learn far more about the rest of the world than ever before. But it also requires that we give priority to practices and processes that can help higher education achieve that goal.

The good news is that we know much more than ever before about what works educationally. Two new AAC&U publications add to that knowledge. The latest LEAP report by George Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices*, summarizes research on ten educational practices that have a significant impact on college student success. Kuh presents a summary of decades of research that shows that participating in certain practices correlates with higher levels of student achievement. And *More Reasons for Hope*, the latest in AAC&U’s Making Excellence Inclusive series, looks at the last ten years of progress in diversity education. This publication describes more than thirty exemplary campus diversity programs, all of which are preparing this generation for effective practice and responsible leadership in a diverse and globally engaged democracy. As always, both these publications draw on the inspiring work of AAC&U member institutions—work that responds directly and creatively to the most important challenges of our times.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

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