

Executive Summary
with findings from Employer Survey

College Learning *for the* *New Global Century*

FROM THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL FOR
Liberal Education & America's Promise



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Executive Summary



College *Learning for the New Global Century* is a report about the aims and outcomes of a twenty-first-century college education. It is also a report about the promises we need to make—and keep—to all students who aspire to a college education, especially to those for whom college is a route, perhaps the only possible route, to a better future.

With college education more important than ever before, both to individual opportunity and to American prosperity, policy attention has turned to a new set of priorities: the expansion of access, the reduction of costs, and accountability for student success.

These issues are important, but something equally important has been left off the table.

Across all the discussion of access, affordability, and even accountability, **there has been a near-total public and policy silence about what contemporary college graduates need to know and be able to do.**

This report fills that void. It builds from the recognition, already widely shared, that in a demanding economic and international environment, Americans will need further learning beyond high school.

The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) takes that recognition to the next level, asking: What kinds of learning? To what ends? Beyond access to college, how should Americans define "success" in college achievement?

The council believes that the policy commitment to expanded college access must be anchored in an equally strong commitment to educational excellence. Student success in college cannot be documented—as it usually is—only in terms of enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment. These widely used metrics, while important, miss entirely the question of whether students who have placed their hopes for the future in higher education are actually achieving the kind of learning they need for life, work, and citizenship.

The public and policy inattention to the aims, scope, and level of student learning in college threatens to erode the potential value of college enrollment for many American students. It has already opened the door to the same kind of unequal educational pathways that became common in the twentieth-century high school, which set high expectations for some and significantly lower expectations—expressed in a narrower and less challenging curriculum—for others.

"Student success in college cannot be documented—as it usually is—only in terms of enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment."

"In the twenty-first century, the world itself is setting very high expectations for knowledge and skill. In this context, educators and employers have begun to reach similar conclusions—an emerging consensus—about the kinds of learning Americans need from college."

In the twenty-first century, the world itself is setting very high expectations for knowledge and skill. This report—based on extensive input from both educators and employers—responds to these new global challenges. It describes the learning contemporary students need from college, and what it will take to help them achieve it.

Preparing Students for Twenty-First-Century Realities

In recent years, the ground has shifted for Americans in virtually every important sphere of life—economic, global, cross-cultural, environmental, civic. The world is being dramatically reshaped by scientific and technological innovations, global interdependence, cross-cultural encounters, and changes in the balance of economic and political power.

Only a few years ago, Americans envisioned a future in which this nation would be the world's only superpower. Today, it is clear that the United States—and individual Americans—will be challenged to engage in unprecedented ways with the global community, collaboratively and competitively.

These waves of dislocating change will only intensify. The world in which today's students will make choices and compose lives is one of disruption rather than certainty, and of interdependence rather than insularity. This volatility also applies to careers. Studies show that Americans already change jobs ten times in the two decades after they turn eighteen, with such change even more frequent for younger workers.

Taking stock of these developments, educators and employers have begun to reach similar conclusions—an emerging consensus—about the kinds of learning Americans need from college. The recommendations in this report are informed by the views of employers, by new standards in a number of the professions, and by a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges, community colleges, and universities about the aims and best practices for a twenty-first-century education.

Across all these centers of dialogue, a new vision for learning is coming into view. The goal of this report is to move from off-camera analysis to public priorities and action.

What Matters in College?

American college students already know that they want a degree. The challenge is to help students become highly intentional about the forms of learning and accomplishment that the degree should represent.

The LEAP National Leadership Council calls on American society to give new priority to a set of educational outcomes that all students need from higher learning, outcomes that are closely calibrated with the challenges of a complex and volatile world.

Keyed to work, life, and citizenship, the essential learning outcomes recommended in this report (see next page) are important for all students and should be fostered and developed across the entire educational experience, and in the context of students' major

The 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 gaining:

★ Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

★ Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

★ Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

★ Integrative Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

Note: This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. The findings are documented in previous publications of the Association of American Colleges and Universities: *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002), *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree* (2004), and *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Achievement in College* (2005). *Liberal Education Outcomes* is available online at www.aacu.org/leap.

fields. These outcomes provide a new framework to guide students' cumulative progress—as well as curricular alignment—from school through college.

The LEAP National Leadership Council does not call for a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum. The recommended learning outcomes can and should be achieved through many different programs of study and in all collegiate institutions, including colleges, community colleges and technical institutes, and universities, both public and private.

Liberal Education and American Capability

The essential learning outcomes are important for a globally engaged democracy, for a dynamic, innovation-fueled economy, and for the development of individual capability. A course of study that helps students develop these capacities is best described as a liberal—and liberating—education.

Reflecting the traditions of American higher education since the founding, the term “liberal education” headlines the kinds of learning needed for a free society and for the full development of human talent. Liberal education has always been this nation's signature educational tradition, and this report builds on its core values: expanding horizons, building understanding of the wider world, honing analytical and communication skills, and fostering responsibilities beyond self.

However, in a deliberate break with the academic categories developed in the twentieth century, the LEAP National Leadership Council disputes the idea that liberal education is achieved only through studies in arts and sciences disciplines. It also challenges the conventional view that liberal education is, by definition, “nonvocational.”

The council defines liberal education for the twenty-first century as a comprehensive set of aims and outcomes (see previous page) that are essential for all students because they are important to all fields of endeavor. Today, in an economy that is dependent on innovation and global savvy, these outcomes have become the keys to economic vitality and individual opportunity. They are the foundations for American success in all fields—from technology and the sciences to communications and the creative arts.

The LEAP National Leadership Council recommends, therefore, that the essential aims and outcomes be emphasized across every field of college study, whether the field is conventionally considered one of the arts and sciences disciplines or whether it is one of the professional and technical fields (business, engineering, education, health, the performing arts, etc.) in which the majority of college students currently major. General education plays a role, but it is not possible to squeeze all these important aims into the general education program alone. The majors must address them as well.

In the last century, higher education divided educational programs into two opposed categories—an elite curriculum emphasizing liberal arts education “for its own sake” and a more applied set of programs

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emphasizing preparation for work. Today, the practices are changing but the old Ivory Tower view of liberal education lingers. It is time to retire it.

This outmoded view is seriously out of touch with innovations on campus, which increasingly foster real-world experience and applications in all disciplines. But it is especially injurious to first-generation students who, the evidence shows, are the most likely to enroll in narrower programs that provide job training but do not emphasize the broader outcomes of a twenty-first-century education. To serve American society well, colleges, universities, and community colleges must take active steps to make liberal education inclusive.

The LEAP National Leadership Council calls, therefore, for vigorous new efforts to help students discover the connections between the essential learning outcomes and the lives they hope to lead. The goal—starting in school and continuing through college—should be to provide the most empowering forms of learning for all college students, not just some of them.

A New Framework for Excellence

The LEAP National Leadership Council recommends, in sum, an education that intentionally fosters, across multiple fields of study, wide-ranging knowledge of science, cultures, and society; high-level intellectual and practical skills; an active commitment to personal and social responsibility; and the demonstrated ability to apply learning to complex problems and challenges.

The council further calls on educators to help students become “intentional learners” who focus, across ascending levels of study and diverse academic programs, on achieving the essential learning outcomes. But to help students do this, educational communities will also have to become far more intentional themselves—both about the kinds of learning students need, and about effective educational practices that help students learn to integrate and apply their learning.

In a society as diverse as the United States, there can be no “one-size-fits-all” design for learning that serves all students and all areas of study. The diversity that characterizes American higher education remains a source of vitality and strength.

Yet all educational institutions and all fields of study also share in a common obligation to prepare their graduates as fully as possible for the real-world demands of work, citizenship, and life in a complex and fast-changing society. In this context, higher education needs a broadly defined educational framework that provides both a shared sense of the aims of education and strong emphasis on effective practices that help students achieve these aims.

To highlight these shared responsibilities, **the council urges a new compact, between educators and American society, to adopt and achieve new Principles of Excellence** (see p. 6).

Informed by a generation of innovation and by scholarly research on effective practices in teaching, learning, and curriculum, the Principles of Excellence offer both challenging standards and flexible

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The Principles of Excellence



Principle One

★ **Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive**

Make the Essential Learning Outcomes a Framework for the Entire Educational Experience, Connecting School, College, Work, and Life

Principle Two

★ **Give Students a Compass**

Focus Each Student's Plan of Study on Achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes—and Assess Progress

Principle Three

★ **Teach the Arts of Inquiry and Innovation**

Immerse All Students in Analysis, Discovery, Problem Solving, and Communication, Beginning in School and Advancing in College

Principle Four

★ **Engage the Big Questions**

Teach through the Curriculum to Far-Reaching Issues—Contemporary and Enduring—in Science and Society, Cultures and Values, Global Interdependence, the Changing Economy, and Human Dignity and Freedom

Principle Five

★ **Connect Knowledge with Choices and Action**

Prepare Students for Citizenship and Work through Engaged and Guided Learning on “Real-World” Problems

Principle Six

★ **Foster Civic, Intercultural, and Ethical Learning**

Emphasize Personal and Social Responsibility, in Every Field of Study

Principle Seven

★ **Assess Students' Ability to Apply Learning to Complex Problems**

Use Assessment to Deepen Learning and to Establish a Culture of Shared Purpose and Continuous Improvement



guidance for an era of educational reform and renewal.

The Principles of Excellence can be applied by any college, community college, or university. They are intended to influence practice across the disciplines as well as in general education programs.

But the principles and the recommendations that accompany them also provide a framework for shared efforts, between school and college, to develop more purposeful pathways for student learning over time. Collectively, they shift the focus—at all levels of education—from course categories and titles to the quality and level of work students are actually expected to accomplish.

Taken together, the Principles of Excellence underscore the need to teach students how to integrate and apply their learning—across multiple levels of schooling and across disparate fields of study. The principles of excellence call for a far-reaching shift in the focus of schooling from accumulating course credits to building real-world capabilities.

A Time for Leadership and Action

The Principles of Excellence build from an era of innovation that is already well under way. As higher education has reached out to serve an ever wider and more diverse set of students, there has been widespread experimentation to develop more effective educational practices and to determine “what works” with today’s college students.

Some of these innovations are so well established that research is already emerging about their effectiveness. The full LEAP report provides a guide to tested and effective educational practices.

To date, however, these active and engaged forms of learning have served only a fraction of students. New research suggests that the benefits are especially significant for students who start farther behind. But often, these students are not the ones actually participating in the high-impact practices.

With campus experimentation already well advanced—on every one of the Principles of Excellence—it is time to move from “pilot efforts” to more far-reaching commitments. The United States comprehensively transformed its designs for learning, at all levels, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Now, as we enter the new global century, Americans need to mobilize again to advance a contemporary set of goals, guiding principles, and practices that will prepare all college students—not just the fortunate few—for twenty-first-century realities.

"The Principles of Excellence call for a far-reaching shift in the focus of schooling from accumulating course credits to building real-world capabilities."

What It Will Take

► Make the Principles of Excellence a Priority on Campus

Colleges, community colleges, and universities stand at the center. Many have already implemented pilot programs that address the vision for learning outlined in this report. The goal now should be to move from partial efforts to a comprehensive focus on students’ cumulative accomplishment over time, and across different parts of their educational experience.

"Students need to hear now from their future employers that narrow learning will limit rather than expand their options."

The LEAP report describes steps that each institution can take to scale up its efforts and focus campus-wide attention both on the aims of education and on intentional practice to help students achieve the intended learning (see p. 14).

► **Form Coalitions, across Sectors, for All Students' Long-Term Interests**

While the value of strong educational leadership on campus cannot be overstated, raising the quality of student learning across the board will require concerted and collective action at all levels of education. The barriers to higher achievement are systemic, and no institution can overcome them on its own. Leaders at all levels will need to work together to build public and student understanding about what matters in college and to establish higher operative standards across the board for college readiness and college achievement.

► **Build Principled and Determined Leadership**

While everyone has a role to play, three forms of enabling leadership will be absolutely essential to champion and advance the work of raising student achievement across the board.

1. High-profile advocacy from presidents, trustees, school leaders, and employers. These leaders, more than any others, are in a position to build public understanding of what matters in a twenty-first-century education. They should vigorously champion and support the essential learning outcomes with the public and in their outreach to students and families. And, they should make the essential learning outcomes a driving priority for their institutions and communities.

2. Curricular leadership from knowledgeable scholars and teachers. While recognized leaders can make higher achievement a priority, faculty and teachers who work directly with students are the only ones who can make it actually happen. At all levels—nationally, regionally, and locally—they will need to take the lead in developing guidelines, curricula, and assignments that connect rich content with students' progressive mastery of essential skills and capabilities. Equally important, those responsible for educating future teachers and future faculty must work to ensure that they are well prepared to help students achieve the intended learning.

3. Policy leadership at multiple levels to support and reward a new framework for educational excellence. Leaders in state systems and schools, in accreditation agencies, in P-16 initiatives, and in educational associations need to act together to set priorities and establish policies that focus on the essential learning outcomes. As they adopt new standards for assessment and accountability, they need to ensure that these standards are designed to foster cumulative accomplishment and integrative learning over time. And, they need to create an environment that both supports and rewards faculty, teacher, and staff investments in more powerful forms of learning.

► **Put Employers in Direct Dialogue with Students**

Students are flocking to college in order to expand their career opportunities. They need to hear now from their future employers—at career fairs, on campus Web sites, and even through podcasts on their iPods—that narrow learning will limit rather than expand their options. When both senior executives and campus recruiters underscore the value of the essential learning outcomes, students will have strong incentives to work steadily toward their achievement.

► **Reclaim the Connections between Liberal Education and Democratic Freedom**

The essential learning outcomes and the Principles of Excellence are important to the economy, certainly. But they are also important to American democracy.

As Americans mobilize determined leadership for educational reform, we need to put the future of democracy at the center of our efforts. An educational program that is indifferent to democratic aspirations, principles, and values will ultimately deplete them. But a democracy united around a shared commitment to educate students for active citizenship will be this nation's best investment in our long-term future.

Liberal Education and America's Promise

With this report, the LEAP National Leadership Council urges a comprehensive commitment, not just to prepare all students for college, but to provide the most powerful forms of learning for all who enroll in college.

Working together, with determination, creativity, and a larger sense of purpose, Americans can fulfill the promise of a liberating college education—for every student and for America's future.

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APPENDIX

Do Employers Value Liberal Education?

As part of the LEAP initiative, AAC&U commissioned Peter D. Hart Research Associates to conduct a series of focus groups and a national survey of employers.* The findings reveal strong support among employers for an increased emphasis on providing all students with a set of “essential learning outcomes” recommended by the LEAP National Leadership Council. Employers interviewed for this survey reject the trend toward narrow technical training at the college level; they believe that, to succeed in the global economy, students need more liberal education, not less.

Employers also stress the importance of providing students with versatile knowledge and skills. In particular, they want to see significantly more emphasis on helping students put their knowledge and skills to practical use in “real-world” settings.

Selected Findings from National Survey of Employers

- Fifty-six percent of employers think colleges and universities should focus on providing all students with *both* a well-rounded education—broad knowledge and skills that apply to a variety of fields—and knowledge and skills in a specific field. Eleven percent of employers favor a primary focus only on providing a well-rounded education, and just 22 percent favor a narrow focus on providing skills and knowledge mainly in a specific field.
- Fully 63 percent of employers believe that recent college graduates do not have the skills they need to succeed in the global economy. Employers recognize that colleges and universities play a major role in the nation’s economic success and ability to drive innovation, but they see significant room for improvement in the level of preparation of today’s graduates.

**In November/December 2006, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., interviewed 305 employers whose companies have at least twenty-five employees and report that 25 percent or more of their new hires hold at least a bachelor’s degree from a four-year college. The margin of error for this survey is +/-5.7 percentage points. In January 2006, Hart Research also conducted three focus groups among business executives—one each in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Fairfax, Virginia; and Atlanta, Georgia. This research focused only on preparation for economic success. The results, therefore, do not reveal respondents’ views on education for citizenship or personal development. Hart Research also interviewed 510 recent graduates of a four-year college. The margin of error for this survey is +/-4.4 percentage points. The complete findings from the focus groups and the national surveys of employers and recent graduates can be found online at www.aacu.org/leap.*

Percentage of Employers Who Want Colleges to “Place More Emphasis” on Essential Learning Outcomes



★ Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

• Science and technology	82%
• Global issues	72%*
• The role of the United States in the world	60%
• Cultural values and traditions (U.S./global)	53%*

★ Intellectual and Practical Skills

• Teamwork skills in diverse groups	76%*
• Critical thinking and analytic reasoning	73%
• Written and oral communication	73%
• Information literacy	70%
• Creativity and innovation	70%
• Complex problem solving	64%
• Quantitative reasoning	60%

★ Personal and Social Responsibility

• Intercultural competence (teamwork in diverse groups)	76%*
• Intercultural knowledge (global issues)	72%*
• Ethics and values	56%
• Cultural values/traditions—U.S./global	53%*

★ Integrative Learning

• Applied knowledge in real-world settings	73%
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Note: These findings are taken from a survey of employers commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and conducted by Peter D. Hart Associates in November and December 2006. For a full report on the survey and its complete findings, see www.aacu.org/leap.

*Three starred items are shown in two learning outcome categories because they apply to both.

- The majority of employers surveyed think colleges and universities should place more emphasis on helping students develop the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands-on experiences. Several focus group participants were especially critical of colleges and universities for providing an education that is too theoretical and disconnected from the real world. Or as one executive says, colleges and universities equal “delayed reality.”

“Disconnected . . . I’ve seen kids come out of school, and my perception is, you know, they’re able to read *The Economist* or they’re able to go online and see something or they’re able to . . . program or build something in a lab, but it doesn’t really have an application to the real world.”

—Male, Fairfax Business Executive

- A majority of employers think that colleges and universities should place more emphasis on skills and areas of knowledge that are cultivated through a liberal education. Figure 1 below shows the percentage of employers who would like to see colleges and universities “place more emphasis” on specific intellectual skills and areas of knowledge.

FIGURE 1

PROPORTION OF EMPLOYERS WHO SAY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD PLACE MORE EMPHASIS THAN THEY DO TODAY ON LIBERAL EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Concepts and new developments in science and technology.....	82%
Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings	76%
The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands-on experiences.....	73%
The ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing.....	73%
Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills.....	73%
Global issues and developments and their implications for the future	72%
The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources	70%
The ability to be innovative and think creatively	70%
The ability to solve complex problems.....	64%
The ability to work with numbers and understand statistics.....	60%
The role of the United States in the world	60%
A sense of integrity and ethics	56%
Cultural values and traditions in America and other countries.....	53%
Civic knowledge, civic participation, and community engagement.....	48%
Proficiency in a foreign language.....	46%
Democracy and government	42%

- Employers strongly endorse the concept of liberal education. When presented with a description of liberal education (see fig. 2) and asked how important they feel it is for colleges and universities to provide this type of education, employers overwhelmingly recognize it as important.

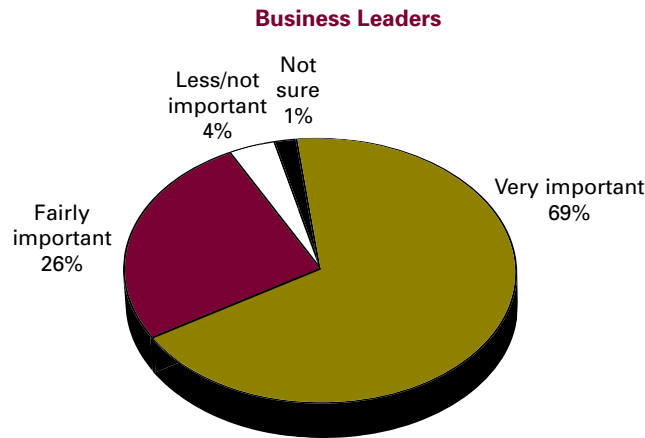
FIGURE 2

ASSESSMENT OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

How important is it for today's colleges and universities to provide the type of education described below?

This particular approach to a four-year college education provides both broad knowledge in a variety of areas of study and more in-depth knowledge in a specific major or field of interest. It also helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

Seventy-six percent of employers would recommend this type of education to a young person they know.



In sum, the great majority of employers believe that, to be well prepared for the changing global economy, today's college students will need to acquire cross-disciplinary knowledge of science and society, a broad range of high-level intellectual and practical skills, intercultural competence, ethical integrity, and the ability to apply their learning to real-world problems.

Employers do not necessarily use the vocabulary of "liberal education." But when asked about the learning students need from college, they give responses that address all the broad areas of knowledge and skill that are central to a strong liberal education.

Campus leaders can use these survey findings to build public and student understanding that, in this global century, the learning outcomes that characterize liberal education have become essential, not elective. In an economy fueled by innovation, they have become the essential passport to economic opportunity.

The question confronting higher education is whether it can and will meet this challenging standard for inclusive excellence.

The Essential Learning Outcomes: What Individual Colleges, Community Colleges, and Universities Can Do



★ **Vision**

The institution—through dialogue with the wider community—articulates a vision for student accomplishment that addresses the essential learning outcomes and the Principles of Excellence in ways appropriate to mission, students, and educational programs.

★ **Resources**

Campus leaders—including presidents, trustees, and senior leaders—advance this vision through their strategic planning, fundraising, resource allocation, and staffing.

★ **Integrative Learning**

The institution creates an intellectual commons where faculty and staff work together to connect the essential outcomes with the content and practices of their educational programs, including general education, departmental majors, the co-curriculum, capstone projects, and assessments.

★ **Intentional Students**

The institution teaches students how to integrate the essential learning outcomes within a purposeful, coherent, and carefully sequenced plan of study.

★ **Accomplishment**

Faculty and staff work to develop student knowledge and capabilities cumulatively and sequentially, drawing on all types of courses—from general education and the majors to electives—as well as non-course experiences. Capstone projects or portfolios make student accomplishment visible.

★ **Evidence**

Faculty and staff members work together—across courses and programs—to assess students' cumulative progress, to audit the connections between intended learning and student accomplishment, to share findings about effective educational practices, and to advance needed change.

★ **Recognition**

Faculty and staff reward systems are organized to support collaborative work—"our work"—as well as individual excellence, and to foster a culture of shared focus and collaborative inquiry about students' progress and cumulative learning across the multiple parts of the college experience.





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