Liberal Arts Illuminated:
Lighting the Path Forward
Illuminating the Path Forward

The Liberal Arts Illuminated conference was a time to reclaim our narrative and proclaim our value. Now, we must focus the spotlight on the indisputable value of the liberal arts.

We face unprecedented challenges in the face of ongoing questions about our value proposition and rapidly changing economics and student demographics. Yet, we want to stay true to our core liberal arts principles as each of us evolves in our own ways.

It is time to tell our story, says S. Georgia Nugent of The Council of Independent Colleges. “For many years, we assumed that everybody understood our story and everybody understood our value. Well, they don’t.”

We have an opportunity to more clearly articulate to ourselves, our students and our public, what “liberal arts” mean and why they remain vital and valuable. We need to more clearly brand the liberal arts as offering both personal enrichment and professional preparation because we know that employers and society seek the skills we cultivate in our students whether they study the arts, humanities or sciences.

We all will follow slightly different paths, but they are lit by the same desire to broaden the circle of education and provide transformative experiences for our students, now and into the future.

This publication is intended to synthesize the conference and to illuminate a path for you to share what you learned in meaningful and actionable ways. Our goal is to elevate the content of the conference by providing action steps and tools to help you guide conversations on your campuses and in the media.

Transforming to meet the complex challenges of the next 50 years will be a collaborative effort. We brought 215 people together in Central Minnesota, and we all stand together to steward our tradition through times of change.

“Our outcomes will be so much better if we act together. It will be better for our students, it will be better for our institutions, it will be better for our democracy.”

– Mary Dana Hinton, College of Saint Benedict
Innovating new approaches
Can we do a better job of instilling these skills and qualities? Yes, and the emerging pedagogical focus on holistic transformation is one way institutions are helping students create clearer connections among their general education, major coursework and the high-impact practices so many of us already have implemented.

“There’s an enormous amount of innovation happening in the teaching and learning space and in the curricular design space,” explains Debra Humphreys of the Association of American Colleges & Universities.

Cultivating engaged citizens
Of course, the value of the liberal arts extends beyond the workplace into our students’ lives and the very fabric of our society, particularly in these polarized times. “A college classroom, when it works well, is the best rehearsal space we have for democracy,” says Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University.

The world needs the engaged, driven, thoughtful citizens that we are in the business of producing, Poskanzer says.

Communicating our story
As we evolve into more deft, more accessible and more holistically focused institutions, we need to celebrate our successes. We need to clearly communicate — to the media, our publics, our students and their families — what we mean by liberal arts and what their value is now and in the future. As Nugent says, we need evangelists.

“The onus is on us to show why what we have to offer is of value in this contemporary world as well as it has been for generations.”

Highlighted Points
• The public and news media do not have a clear understanding of what a liberal arts education means and the value it brings to our students and our society. This presents an opportunity to redefine our narrative and more clearly and consistently communicate our message.

• According to Inside Higher Ed’s Scott Jasculik, institutions tend to focus media interactions on majors while underplaying the importance of the general education that is key to the liberal arts.

• The liberal arts continue to have tremendous societal value in that they prepare students to be critical thinkers, lifelong learners and active, thoughtful participants in democracy.

• The liberal arts continue to have tremendous workplace value because they provide the knowledge skills employers are seeking.

• Data does not support the narrative that most liberal arts graduates are unemployed and unemployable, a pervasive myth institutions need to address.

Suggested Action Steps
1 Initiate conversations with faculty and students regarding your institution’s unique liberal arts history and tradition and how liberal arts education is enacted at your campus. (Charlie Blaich)

2 Engage with your student journalists. This will foster understanding of the liberal arts, which can serve as an informed undertone in their writing. (Beckie Supiano)

3 Create and submit data-rich pieces to local media to make a quantifiable case for the outcomes and value of the liberal arts and generate statistics to communicate our message. (Lori Sturdevant)

4 Take a proactive rather than defensive media relations approach by thinking like a journalist and suggesting stories. (Lori Sturdevant)

5 Evaluate your institution’s marketing materials to determine whether they differentiate you and project your unique position and value or present homogenized images and messages. (Charlie Blaich)

What Do Employers Need?
AACU’s research shows that at least four of five employers rate these learning outcomes as very important:
• Oral communication
• Written communication
• Critical/analytical thinking
• Working effectively with others in teams
• Ethical judgment and decision-making
• Applying knowledge/skills to the real-world
The liberal arts can be and often are a tremendous transformational force, but consistently facilitating rich, life-changing experiences requires us to transform ourselves in order to provide a path for students to synthesize their educational experience. “They’re not able to connect the dots because we’re not helping them enough to do that,” says the Association of American Colleges & Universities’ Debra Humphreys.

Creating cohesiveness
How do we connect these dots? By creating a coherent narrative and using a conceptual framework for the holistic transformation of students, explains Rebecca Chopp of University of Denver. Holistic transformation, as Chopp sees it, entails the knitting together of problem-based learning, life of the mind, intentional community and porous performance with a faculty member. “There are relatively large institutions that are doing quite well. There are small institutions that are not showing the kinds of impacts that you would really expect to see,” McCormick says.

The Center of Inquiry’s Charlie Blaich explains that we need to examine our assumptions that small, prestigious or selective institutions guarantee a quality education. “The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education” shows that only students who consistently receive well-organized instruction and deep approaches to learning gain critical thinking skills and deep interest in engaging in difficult intellectual activity, regardless of the size or type of institution they attend. “What makes it good is the practices we engage in, not the situation,” Blaich says.

Expanding educational reach
Translative education extends beyond the classroom to residence halls, Chopp says. “We’re entering an era where we really can claim more responsibility, more guidance, more coaching, more mentoring, more using senior and junior students, more taking every opportunity. "This is an era of a lot of invention, and we need to do this because this is where students already are picking up values and virtues, and we should guide them.”

Wise of the Center of Inquiry at Wabash College. However, some of us fail to fully realize that advantage. For example, student- faculty interaction plays a critical role, but the National Survey of Student Engagement’s 2015 annual results reveal significant variability among liberal arts institutions’ engagement indicators, explains NSSE’s Alexander C. McCormick. The study surveyed first-year and senior students regarding how often they talked about career plans with a faculty member, worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework, discussed course topics, ideas or concepts with a faculty member outside of class and discussed academic performance with a faculty member.

Where Is Our Sector Going and How Is It Transformative?
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Highlighted Points
- Some institutions are adopting teaching models that offer students a holistic transformational experience, stitching together changes in knowledge, high-impact learning practices, life of the mind, intentional community.
- Many institutions can do more to create connections between the different pieces of students’ educational paths, such as scaffolding courses and experiences so students see the big picture rather than a disjointed list of classes and experiences.
- While many liberal arts colleges are adept at fostering students’ critical thinking skills and interest in engaging in difficult intellectual activity, others are not. Classes that are well-organized, provide student-faculty interaction and engage in deep learning successfully help students acquire those skills.
- Liberal arts institutions in the past were self-contained, but holistic transformation requires becoming a more porous and nimble organization that fosters partnerships and collaboration outside of campus boundaries.
- Residence halls provide another platform for learning that can help to create intentional communities that teach respect, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills.

Suggested Action Steps
1. Review your curriculum model to see that you are creating clear connections for students among their general education classes, major coursework and high-impact practices. (Debra Humphreys)
2. Challenge your institution’s assumptions about its “power of place,” or the notion that its selectivity, small size or prestige guarantees a good education. (Charlie Blaich)
3. Examine your data about the ideals and standards your institution has set and see what it tells you. If you don’t have the data, begin collecting it or consult your National Survey of Student Engagement results. (Alexander C. McCormick)
4. Approach research as a pedagogy rather than a means to publish, and engage students in the intellectual process behind the practice of scholarship. (Charlie Blaich)
5. Investigate alternative learning spaces such as centers and institutes to enhance students’ classroom experiences. (Rebecca Chopp)

High-Impact Practices
- First-Year Seminars and Experiences
- Common Intellectual Experiences
- Learning Communities
- Writing-Intensive Courses
- Collaborative Assignments and Projects
- Undergraduate Research
- Diversity/Global Learning
- Service Learning/Community-Based Learning
- Internships
- Capstone Courses and Projects — AAC&U

The percentage of AAC&U member institutions that require all students to participate in significant or integrated applied learning projects. 50% require them for some students, and 6% do not offer them at all.

The demographics of our student body are changing rapidly as costs continue to rise and government funding and family income stall, creating a tempest for institutions striving to deliver both equity and excellence.

Fostering diversity. “I believe the most burning question for all of us is how to adequately provide access to a more diverse student body — socioeconomically, ethnically, racially — but the economics of our institutions are working against that,” explains Carol Christ of University of California at Berkeley.

Cultivating a diverse student body enriches the educational experience for all students.

As Columbia University’s Andrew Delbanco notes, one of the fundamental principles of the American college is that students have a great deal to learn from each other. “But that is only really true if they’re not all alike, so I think it’s really imperative that we defend this principle.”

Improving equity. The Lumina Foundation’s Zakiya Smith points out that Georgetown University’s research finds that highly selective colleges are largely filled with white students, while two- and four-year open-access schools are flooded with African-American and Hispanic students. “There are many people who really believe that higher education right now is becoming an instigator of more inequality rather than something that makes our society more equitable,” Smith says.

“We aren’t educating thoughtful engaged citizens if they’re not prepared to understand difference and the impact of privilege and the work that gets done or needs to get done all the time.” — Steven B. Parkarz, Carleton College

Prioritizing affordability. Affordability is an important piece of this equation, particularly at more selective, wealthier schools. “The most important thing they can do, and some of them do it but they don’t all do it, is offer need-based financial aid to yield a more diverse student population,” says National Survey of Student Engagement’s Alexander C. McCormick.

We also need to be clearer about cost, advises Robert B. Archibald of the College of William and Mary. Vague pricing can drive away first-generation and less privileged potential students who can afford college but are frightened by the initial number.

Enhancing quality. Completion and student success also are critical. Debra Humphreys of the Association of American Colleges & Universities explains that students of color, first-generation students and students coming into college with lower test scores particularly benefit from high-impact practices but are less likely to take advantage of them. Making this an advising priority would help address this, as would focusing fundraising on programs such as study abroad, internships and service learning.

Increasing accessibility. We can remove barriers for students who lack funds, time or transportation by offering more accessible substitutes or aligning with initiatives such as the Bonner Program, a national service-based college scholarship program for low-income, first-generation and diverse students. “Students who succeed find a home, they find a reason why they’re there, something to care about,” says Robert (Bobby) Hackett of the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation.

Innovating economy. Offering more for less will require some of us to look beyond our campuses, Christ explains. “We have to think long and hard about not just how we can individually cut costs but how we can imagine different kinds of organizational partnerships that might enable us to deliver education to students and their families more economically.”

### Highlighted Points

- Cultivating a racially, culturally and socioeconomically diverse student body is not just the right thing to do for the students and the expansion of education on which the liberal arts were founded, it also facilitates student-to-student learning.
- Increasing access to a diverse student population, particularly less privileged students, is challenging in the face of right budgets. Institutions need to prioritize need-based aid and funding to make high-impact practices available to all students.
- America’s 468 most well-funded, selective schools have overwhelmingly white student bodies, while more African-American and Hispanic students attend the least-funded, open-enrollment two- and four-year colleges.
- Students of color, first-generation students and students with lower test scores or GPAs are less likely to take advantage of high-impact practices but benefit from them the most.
- AAC&U reports that half of its member institutions “have equity goals to close racial and/or ethnic gaps in retention and on-time graduation. Fewer have goals to address inequities in achievement of learning outcomes or participation in high-impact practices.”

### Suggested Action Steps

1. Explore partnership opportunities with a community college or other open-enrollment school that allow students a less-expensive general education. (Carol Christ)
2. Create infrastructure such as enhanced advising to retain and nurture the success of students of color and low-income and first-generation students. (Debra Humphreys)
3. Consider programs and alternative ways to offer high-impact practices such as internships, service learning and study abroad so they are more accessible to less privileged students. The Bonner Program provides a successful model. (Bobby Hackett)
4. Prioritize funding need-based scholarships. (Alexander C. McCormick)
5. Communicate costs in concrete terms so lower-income students are not deterred by sticker shock or vague pricing. (Robert B. Archibald)
6. Exercise some “deliberate forgetting” to eliminate practices that are not serving the institution as well as they once did and focus on pursuing the activities that are core to your mission and those at which you are most effective. (Carol Christ)
What Should We Do to Make Sure the Liberal Arts Thrive Over the Next 50 Years?

These are times of great opportunities and unprecedented challenges for the liberal arts. We must evolve to meet the needs of changing student demographics in a tough economy while also retaining our tradition. This requires finding new approaches to align our “mission, market and management practices” with our aspirations, says Jon McGee of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University.

Preventing for change

Georgetown University research predicts that in 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require post-secondary education and training beyond high school. 1 In that kind of world, we’re going to have lots of different colleges, lots of different students, lots of different approaches to higher education,” says University of Denver’s Rebecca Chopp.

For some liberal arts institutions, this means building upon their core values while becoming more agile, looking at trends in technology and curriculum unbundling — offering courses in a modular format separate from general education or majors — and asking what they can do differently and what remains key to their mission. However, as Chopp notes, institutions that unbundle also should offer a re-bundle.2 “We have to have something knit together that brings a holistic education.

“Bringing the liberal arts education is going to be very strong in the future, but it will be provided by people who know how to be more nimble and better at delivering that education.” – Eric P. Blackhurst, Alma College

Making difficult decisions

Many of us are going to have to make “incredibly messy choices,” McGee warns. “You have to ask yourself tough questions: ‘Why do we do things this way? Is there a better way to start than making cuts? What level of quality or service can we provide with the resources we have available? What spending choices do we have that are non-negotiable?’

Deciding whether to reinforce our current identity or reinvent ourselves will help each of us identify funding priorities and reallocate resources. For example, those that remain residential must expand co-curricular programming to enhance the value of the campus as a “destination location,” Beyer says.

Our institutions will have to consider and quickly act on decisions to terminate some longstanding programs. “We need to be quicker to fail, try more things and stop doing some things. We need to be able to get into our lexicon things like ‘No. It’s going to end. This needs to end now,’” says Alma College’s Eric P. Blackhurst. “Just innovating and cutting. We need to be quicker to fail, try more things and stop doing some things. We need to be able to get into our lexicon things like ‘No. It’s going to end. This needs to end now’,” says Alma College’s Eric P. Blackhurst.

“I believe the liberal arts education is going to be very strong in the future, but it will be provided by people who know how to be more nimble and better at delivering that education.” – Eric P. Blackhurst, Alma College

Alter the business model

Our institutional economic models must change in the face of dwindling government funding, sluggish family income and cautious borrowing. “Family finances have stagnated for a long time, and this is not a temporary trend. This is a long-term trend,” explains Chris Farrell of Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media.

Traditional cost-cutting and tuition discounting are not sustainable and should be supplemented with innovative and creative practices for growing and diversifying, says Rick Beyer of AGB Institutional Strategies.

Suggested Action Steps

1. Complete a diagnostics review to quantify financial challenges and gaps in areas such as operational and infrastructure, and to determine which of the macro trends shaping higher education align with your institution’s mission and strengths. (Rick Beyer)

2. Develop tactical implementation plans that include key assumptions, leadership accountability, required measurement metrics, financial modeling, risks, investments, milestones and timelines. (Rick Beyer)

3. Consult your mission statement to clarify which spending choices are non-negotiable and what can be reallocated. (Jon McGee)

4. Explore partnerships with community colleges or similar institutions to supplement curricula and streamline costs. (Carol Christ and Rebecca Chopp)

5. If your school sees a lot of transfer students, step up your pace for admitting and retaining your process to work with a full-year rather than the December-intensive timeline and multi-year marketing. (Rick Beyer)

6. Think about ways to connect with your alumni’s life-long learning needs to broaden your student base and foster ongoing connections with alumni. (Chris Farrell)
Innovative partnerships are emerging as effective strategies for institutions to deliver the value the public expects of us in this new educational and economic climate. Collaborating with businesses, civic leaders, alumni and other institutions enables us to manage costs and broaden student experiences. The context in which each of us operates — our mission, scale and market — determines the partnerships we should foster. Here are three examples that emerged at the conference.

How Do We Foster Innovative Collaborations and Partnerships?

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University

These private liberal arts institutions share a unique partnership and a “collaborative academic program.” Over the past 50 years, Saint Benedict and Saint John’s have fully integrated three areas: academic affairs, admissions and communications. They share one provost, one academic affairs office and budget and one academic program. Faculty teach on both campuses, and students attend classes together on both campuses according to a single academic calendar.

However, they also maintain individual identities, Saint Benedict as a college for women and Saint John’s as a college for men. Each has its own physical campus, residence halls, dining halls and traditions. They have separate student development programs, independent athletic programs, two advancement offices and separate governing boards. They maintain what they refer to as “permanent interdependence.”

“All too often, people want to reduce it to the financial piece,” says Mary Dana Hinton of Saint Benedict. “I would say you shouldn’t start with that. We have this added opportunity to make what is the best decision for our individual institution, but we also have to discern what is the best for our partnership. If we don’t, we won’t exist.”

Saint Benedict and Saint John’s align well because they are located only a few miles apart and both steeped in a Catholic, Benedictine liberal arts tradition. “Think about your identity and what’s important to your institution, and what you will give up and what you won’t. Find a partnership to benefit your students to the maximum. Keep what’s working and find new great things,” says Michael Hemesath of Saint John’s.

His suggestion: Start with academic programs. “Ask yourself, can we share these three departments with institution ‘X’? Think about doing joint hiring. This kind of collaboration is something you can do in the short run to benefit your students and institution, and then you can move into other things.”

University of California at Berkeley

An innovative extension program enables Berkeley to prepare spring admission transfer students before they begin taking courses on the main campus. A group of 700 students takes courses in unused classroom space at nearby American Baptist Seminary West.

“They take a very limited set of classes, have very intense advising, and then they move to Berkeley in the spring,” explains University of California at Berkeley’s Carol Christ. The program has been a success. “These students graduate at higher rates and have higher GPAs than the fall admits.

“I’ve often wondered whether private colleges might do that kind of thing, might have pods of students on community college campuses or might advertise a dual admit.” This would enable students to take their first two years of education at a community college and their last two at the private college. Christ suggests.

“Our partnerships need to be a lot more both aggressive and much more working together.”

University of Denver

The University of Denver is harnessing creative collaboration to carry out its strategic plan, which focuses on holistic student development.

First, administrators and faculty members drew from outside sources to inform the plan. “We plunged into this, talking to 2,500 people. What that tells you is everybody wanted to talk. We did a lot of research. We talked to 350 employers and civic leaders in the city. We Skyped in people from all across the country,” says the University’s Rebecca Chopp.

The completed strategic plan opened opportunities for community partnerships. “We knew already that our students were very interested in high-impact learning and other forms of work in the community, so we engaged with Denver big time,” Chopp says.

“And in fact I think the coolest idea of our strategic plan is something called the Global Challenges, where we decided to take 10 to 15 percent of our courses on a year or every-other-year basis and tackle one of the big challenges so we could bring in people from Denver or the Rocky Mountains and beyond. And we had a critical mass in order to do high-impact, holistic learning.”
References


Books at Liberal Arts Illuminated

A list of books written by presenters and also referred to in presenter presentations emerged at the conference and are listed below.


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