

AAC&U's Integrative Liberal Learning and the CAS Standards: Advising for a 21st Century Liberal Education

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The Association of American Colleges and Universities presented and promoted integrative liberal learning as a collaborative goal that all institutions of higher education must strive to achieve. The similarities between the goals of integrative liberal learning and the Standards for Academic Advising by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education are discussed with emphasis placed on the critical role that academic advising plays in support of an integrative liberal learning education, and in turn, future success for all students.

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The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2014a)

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. (§1)

Its mission is “to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education” (AAC&U, 2014c, §1). It promotes liberal education as a necessity of all higher educational learning experiences and opportunities through the advancement of projects such as integrative liberal learning.

The AAC&U concept of integrative liberal learning involves strategic and intentional learning across boundaries to provide a developmental and holistic educational experience for students. It

includes more comprehensive and integrated learning opportunities than garnered solely by the major, general education courses, and the curriculum (AAC&U, 2014a, 2014b). The intentional, integrated focus on the provision of these experiences differs from the historical practices of liberal education. Integrative liberal learning counters the false dichotomy of vocational–professional versus liberal arts education (Hagerty, 2013), emphasizing the need for a combined and unified liberal education that includes curricular, cocurricular, and pedagogical innovations offered in a purposeful, collaborative manner to provide a more holistic undergraduate experience regardless of a student's major or degree program.

The principles of integrative liberal learning describe educational experiences that

- develop the whole student for personal growth, economic productivity, and responsible citizenship.
- prepare students to tackle complex and unscripted problems by applying evidence-based reasoning, judgment, and ethical considerations to questions with elusive answers that lead to important consequences.
- intentionally and coherently connect student experiences in the curriculum, between the curriculum and cocurriculum, and within large communities.
- allow students to demonstrate to themselves and others the gains made through the integrative liberal educational experience as a whole.
- provide the greatest value for both the individual and society.
- promote adaptability, creativity, and new perspectives so students can apply their knowledge and skills to new situations.
- demonstrate the powerful impact of integrative liberal learning for all students across all types of institutions and modes of education. (AAC&U, 2012)

To promote these integrative liberal learning principles, the AAC&U emphasizes curricular designs based on student developmental stages

and the importance of scaffolding experiences, making explicit the connections among a variety of learning situations as well as highly personalized and collaborative experiences that allow for skill development as a result of the integrated curriculum. It also advocates for paradigms that provide challenging, supportive, and adaptable pedagogies for diverse student populations and opportunities built upon assessment strategies such as reflection, self-assessment, goals setting, and problem solving (AAC&U, 2012). “High impact” (AAC&U, 2011, p. 18) practices and opportunities for students include first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, undergraduate research opportunities, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity and global learning, service- and community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. Higher education institutions embrace various of these practices, but in many cases, institutional leaders will need to rethink pedagogy and curricula and also plan budgets specifically to provide liberal learning educational opportunities.

Benefits of an Integrative Liberal Learning Education

According to the AAC&U (2014d), a 21st-century liberal education involves

an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. (§1)

Whether a student participates in a pre-professional, vocational, or applied major or a liberal arts program, a total integrative experience best prepares the individual to address current and future issues, problems, and challenges.

Liberal Education and America’s Promise Initiative

The Liberal Education & America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative from the AAC&U (2011)

suggests that a liberal education should be available to all postsecondary students regardless of academic background, socioeconomic status, type of college or university of matriculation, or any other factor or characteristic. A student accepted into an institution of higher education should receive the opportunity to receive a liberal education. The LEAP initiative promotes

- the championing of the value of a liberal education;
- the generation of research on key outcomes of a quality education;
- the proposition that success in college cannot be accurately documented as historically done via metrics such as enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment;
- the contention that traditional metrics do not measure whether students are achieving the kind of learning they need for a successful life, career, and citizenship in the ever-changing world;
- the suggestion that dramatic changes in technology, global interdependence, and cross-cultural interactions as well as balances of economic and political powers require specific skills and adaptability;
- the assertion that educators and employers recognize the kinds of education Americans need in college;
- the recognition that a one-size-fits-all curriculum is not adequate and that instead recommended outcomes can (and should) be achieved through different programs of study at different types of higher educational institutions. (AAC&U, 2011, p. 8)

In addition, the AAC&U (2011, p. 7) offers LEAP recommended student learning outcomes (SLOs):

- knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world;
- intellectual and practical skills such as those required for inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative and information literacy, teamwork, and problem solving;
- personal and social responsibility such as those apparent in civic knowledge, local and global engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical

- reasoning and action, foundations and skills for lifelong learning; and
- integrative and applied learning.

In sum, the LEAP initiative exemplifies the belief that the valuable role of general education cannot fulfill all of the important outcomes necessary to equip students for the 21st century. Educational communities need to intentionally foster integrative practices that allow students to meet SLOs, which requires enhancing both institutional and student appreciation of the importance of SLOs over course requirement checklists as the embodiment of effective educational planning.

Employers Want a Liberally Educated Workforce

Employers are expecting more from college graduates than ever before (Baker, 2009). A 2013 online survey (conducted by Hart Research Associates for the AAC&U) asked 318 executives from private sector and nonprofit organizations, each employing 25 or more people, the skills and characteristics they sought in a new employee (AAC&U, 2013). The majority of employers agreed that employees must show the (a) ability to innovate as they will need to acquire broader skill sets than their counterparts of the past; (b) capabilities that cut across majors, which not only garner success, but add more value than those honed in a specific undergraduate major; (c) field-specific knowledge and skills in addition to the broad range earned from a liberal education and most important for long-term success; and (d) critical thinking and broad skill sets for taking on complex challenges in the work place. Surveyed employers also endorsed education practices that involve students in active, applied work as well as a liberal education by indicating that they would recommend such an education to a child or person they knew. Other research shows similar results: Employers consistently report wanting employees with a broad knowledge base who can think critically, debate, communicate, and work with others to solve problems (Grasgreen, 2014).

All the skills identified by employers characterize outcomes provided by an integrative liberal education. As Shaffer (1997/2009, p. 83; see also Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011) posited in the concept of human capital, the education, skills, and preparation students receive via a higher education experience should enable graduates to continually adapt and reinvent themselves as

necessary in the ever-evolving workplace. An integrative liberal learning experience provides such an education.

Promoting Integrative Liberal Learning

To meet SLOs consistent with 21st century expectations, institutions need to promote and practice integrative liberal learning. First, the institutional framework must promote the integrative liberal learning and high-impact experiences that extend beyond the offerings of a traditionally conceived liberal education. General education contributes to these outcomes, but cannot fulfill all of the criteria for learning important to a globalized education; integrative liberal learning involves planned, strategic programming of educational opportunities for students.

Second, to advocate for liberal learning, faculty members, academic advisors, and staff from relevant units must take ownership of the process from the ground-roots level. The time for “siloed” (Shockley-Zalabak, 2012, p. 14) efforts has passed; today, communication and collaboration are needed across all institutional situations so that students experience and achieve integrative liberal learning. In summary, the student’s entire college experience—curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular—must embody more efforts than necessary to continue the historical check-box mentality of both students and institutional representatives (faculty members, advisors, and staff) often reflected in statements indicating that students must get requirements out of the way before they can begin to study the core classes specific to the major.

Third, this effort to enhance the understandings that promote a changed mind-set means that educational communities must intentionally foster integrative practices that allow students to meet the SLOs. Finally, and importantly, not all courses, services, or activities need to meet all desired goals and outcomes of integrative liberal learning; rather, the combination and integration of the total experience allows students to meet programmatic, departmental, institutional, and integrative learning goals and outcomes.

The CAS Standards for Academic Advising

CAS standards support the effort to effect integrative liberal learning:

Founded in 1979, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) is the pre-eminent force for promoting standards in student affairs,

student services, and student development programs. CAS creates and delivers dynamic, credible standards, guidelines, and Self-Assessment Guides that are designed to lead to a host of quality programs and services. CAS aims to foster and enhance student learning, development, and achievement.

CAS Standards respond to real-time student needs, the requirements of sound pedagogy, and the effective management of 44 functional areas. Individuals and institutions from nearly 40 CAS member organizations comprise a constituency of over 100,000 professionals. Representing a significant majority of higher education practitioners in student programs and services throughout the country and beyond, CAS provides tools to higher education leaders assessing institutional effectiveness, student learning, and outcomes. (CAS, 2014, ¶1–2)

The CAS Standards for Academic Advising include 26 dimensions across six domains from which SLOs for academic advising can be derived or classified. They reflect relevant and desirable standards for academic advising as developed based on every type of postsecondary academic setting. Because students meet a standard based on exposure to it and their own maturity, advisors must systematically introduce these concepts and expectations. The CAS standards often comprise a source for programmatic academic-advising goals. They reflect the student experience as individualistic, developmental, and holistic by including curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular experiences that result in the entire student learning process. For example, according to several of the dimensions within the CAS (2013, pp. 5–6) domains, as a result of academic advising students are able to

- understand knowledge from a range of disciplines; connect knowledge to other knowledge areas, ideas, and experiences; construct knowledge; and relate knowledge to daily life.
- perform realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect; experience identity development; possess a commitment to ethics and integrity; and possess spiritual awareness.
- understand and appreciate cultural and human differences; develop social respon-

sibility, global perspective, and a sense of civic responsibility.

The similarities and overlap of CAS standards and the AAC&U principles and practices for integrative liberal learning clearly emerge.

Academic Advising

Research suggests that postsecondary educators are not communicating the importance of a liberal education to their students and the resulting lack of understanding about it impedes students' ability to become intentional learners (Schneider & Humphreys, 2005). The advising interaction provides one of the best situations in which students can learn the value of an integrative liberal learning education and the outcomes that will benefit them so they become more intentional about their own educations.

Shockley-Zalabak (2010) pointed out the changing nature of the academic advisor's role, suggesting that advisors need to act as "intentional interaction designers" (p. 13) involved in the creation of experiences for students that contribute to their continuing and future successes. In this manner, academic advisors who recognize and appreciate the value of an integrative liberal learning education help students understand the connection between all of their higher education experiences (Lowenstein, 2005/2009) including the long-term value and efficacy of such an education.

As Rust (2011, p. 6) emphasized, academic advisors stand at the crossroads of all curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular avenues available for students. Because they cannot serve as expert generalists or know all possible combinations of integrative experiences available to students, advisors must look beyond traditional categories of major and general education requirements to direct the student to valuable integrative liberal learning experiences and opportunities. Accordingly, they must recognize both their immediate obligations as well as overarching contributions to the integrative liberal learning experience for individuals and the general environment at their institutions. They need to create the necessary process and delivery outcomes that meet desired student learning and development outcomes (Robbins, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011) of an integrative liberal learning education. In this way, and through many other means, academic advisors support students through engagement (Campbell & Nutt, 2008).

They also employ scaffolding for combining and building upon the primary aspects of integrative liberal learning as described by the AAC&U.

Academic advising administrators also play a key role in promoting integrative liberal learning. The goals of an integrative liberal learning experience and the CAS standards for academic advising (2013) lay a powerful foundation for building a new academic advising initiative or revamping an existing program. They can undergird the development of SLOs (and in turn process and delivery or programmatic outcomes) for academic advising, which are necessary for leaders to identify the training and development needs for academic advisors as well as the components for on-campus assessment efforts (Robbins, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011).

Academic advising administrators struggling with an assessment start-up for their programs can turn to the work of the AAC&U and CAS. For example, the SLO for academic advising of “Students gather information on study abroad by the end of the sophomore year” reflects characteristics of a high impact experience (study abroad) such that the advisor must possess knowledge of opportunities outside major and general educational requirements. It also requires collaboration between the advisor, the student, and the Study Abroad/International Education office (and possibly others). This SLO for academic advising thus maps to at least one, if not more, of the AAC&U integrative liberal learning principles and practices, LEAP essential learning outcomes, and the CAS standards for academic advising dimensions and domains. The overall results of the efforts involved in meeting the SLO include the recognition of the concept, importance, and practice of an integrative liberal learning education as well as the need for institutional and advising focus and prioritization. Administrators must also demonstrate the ability to track SLOs to the tenets of student learning in higher education. Of course, they then must undertake assessment of the achievement of the desired outcome (Robbins, 2011; Robbins & Zarges, 2011).

Summary

The overlap and parallel characteristics of the ideas, principles, goals, and suggested practices (and even SLOs) presented by leading members of the AAC&U and CAS are neither an accident nor based on chance. Liberal arts education has historically provided the knowledge and skills in

addition to and beyond technical training that graduates need and employers want; the skills needed for 21st century graduates merely add to this tradition. An integrative liberal learning education provides for these needs, and higher education leaders, such as the AAC&U and CAS, promote the exact outcomes necessary for students to gain such an education.

The efforts of postsecondary advocates bolster the role of academic advising as education and society continue to evolve. Perhaps even more important, the leadership of colleges and universities must continue to recognize the centrality and importance of effective academic advising in this emerging educational environment and provide the resources for improvements in programs and services. They must also identify and assess vital SLOs for academic advising and implement effective reward and recognition systems for academic units that meet objectives (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). Academic advising is at the core of higher education and student success.

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