How does large-scale collaboration in higher education happen? It takes agency and intention, no doubt. Faculty have to want to organize and do the work for the sake of students. That kind of action means having something worthwhile to share, a core set of ideas that faculty and staff believe in and can own, and key understandings and principles—such as the commitment to make excellence inclusive and consensus on a set of common learning outcomes. It also takes good will and gumption, willingness to work uphill, a bit of serendipity, and a hunch that getting a large number of people to work together to increase student success can be satisfying.

But who would imagine that collaboration to bring change in higher education would come laden with friendship? No one ever thinks that the task of transformational work on the curriculum is easy. No one would ever think it less than stupendously hard to change the way state systems and systems of higher education do their work. People nonetheless keep trying. Five years into the LEAP States initiative, we can celebrate extraordinary good fellowship—and even fun—and we can point to real accomplishment in the continuing effort. We think we are making a difference to the quality of our students’ learning.

In this issue of Peer Review, we feature what AAC&U’s partner LEAP states have done, and more importantly, a set of lessons learned that can help other colleges, universities, and systems who want to scale up completion and quality initiatives.

Liberal Education and America’s Promise

The LEAP States initiative is part of Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), the signature initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). LEAP States makes use of resources developed through LEAP as frameworks and catalysts for large-scale, systemic collaboration designed to increase student learning. It supports the participation in LEAP of groups or networks of campuses based on locale—in states, state systems, or regions. The entire LEAP campaign puts student learning at the center, advancing a set of essential learning outcomes (ELOs) that emerged from the field. Responsive to the shift in perspective from teaching to learning, the ELOs were developed through LEAP and AAC&U’s earlier project Greater Expectations (AAC&U 2002; Barr and Tagg 1995).

In the LEAP States initiative we have learned that student learning and faculty leadership are utterly critical to successful collaboration, whether on a single campus or across a large system. The Campus Action Network (CAN), a connected set of institutions developed as part of LEAP, is composed of more than three hundred campuses that have signed on individually or as part of state systems to work together to advance the goals of LEAP: to articulate high expectations for student achievement of liberal education outcomes, connect educational practices and assessments to those expectations, and ensure that all students reach high levels of achievement of a set of essential learning outcomes. Campuses may participate in both CAN and LEAP States activities.

LEAP is democratic as a matter of principle and as a commitment to advocacy. The campaign seeks to advance liberal education for everyone and to discover evidence that everyone is a truly inclusive term—in this sense, everyone includes a diversity of access to quality learning and equitable participation of every racial/ethnic and socioeconomic group in the demographic panorama of the United States. The initiative provides opportunities for faculty to join other campus, system, and community leaders in shared work—top down and bottom up, together, with a view from the inside of systems and campuses, and from the outside in. This multidimensional perspective on systemic leadership and the priority of work on the ground with faculty characterizes LEAP States.
LEAP States fosters communication, capacity building, and policy development among and across states and systems. It constructs platforms for campus action and shares the means to advance ELOs in both general education and the major. Through system-based work, the initiative makes the case for large-scale collaboration toward inclusion and success for all students within states, systems, and regions. The initiative recognizes the fact that in the twenty-first century, students move or “swirl” toward degrees along many divergent pathways. To help networks or systems of campuses bring coherence, intentionality, and high-quality liberal education into students’ experience—whatever their pathway may be—is precisely what LEAP States intends. To help states reach their objectives for degree attainment, workforce development, and engaged civic life through access to high-quality liberal education is the ultimate goal of LEAP States. LEAP States agreements are broadly inclusive, voluntary, and nonbinding. In most cases, the state leadership originates in a public higher education system or a coordinating council. A state system or council generally takes the lead in requesting LEAP State status. AAC&U encourages all LEAP States to form partnerships across educational sectors, two- and four-year, public and private, and to engage P-16, civic, and business leaders. (For more information, see http://www.aacu.org/leap/states.cfm.)

As of January 2011, the following systems have made agreements with AAC&U to work on behalf of their states: the California State University System, the North Dakota University System, the Oregon University System, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, the University of Wisconsin System, and the Utah System of Higher Education.

Honoring Campuses’ Identities

The LEAP States initiative intends to make it possible for state systems, states, and regions to take advantage of the consensus that has emerged from the LEAP campaign—and at the same time respect and celebrate their own identities. Of the operating principles guiding LEAP States, the principle of alignment that respects the identity of the campus within the state or system comes first. Higher education in the United States, AAC&U has long maintained, is the richer for its diversity. AAC&U likewise recognizes that states organize and support higher education in a wide variety of ways, using a wide variety of governance or coordinating structures. Just as LEAP honors the identity of campuses and the centrality of faculty leadership, LEAP States recognizes and honors the identity and context of participating collaboratives, states, and regions.

The LEAP States initiative builds on a set of principles of excellence. The seven principles of excellence that inform the LEAP campaign emerged through discussion with educators around the country over a period of years (AAC&U 2007; AAC&U 2011). First, LEAP makes the case that campuses—with faculty leadership—can aim high and make excellence inclusive. This principle envisions equity and excellent learning together and guides people to practice both together. Second, with faculty leadership, campuses can give students a compass, can be more intentional in mapping and remapping the curriculum and giving students the means to navigate through it. They can demonstrate the will to achieve ELOs, to use highly effective and high-impact educational practices (HIPs) to reach the outcomes, and to assess learning as a way to demonstrate that students have achieved the intended outcomes (Kuh 2008; Brownell and Swaner 2010). If campuses can do this work, so too can systems, states, and regions. The LEAP campaign as a whole—with its emphasis on leadership, campus action, and research—has produced an abundance of principled and practical materials useful for such collaboration. LEAP public leadership and advocacy materials, including employer surveys, are valuable for state and regional work. (For useful related tools, see the LEAP Campus Toolkit at http://leap.aacu.org/toolkit/.)

At LEAP forums convened periodically by state leaders, local employers join with educational and civic leaders to address the quality of college learning as it shapes workforce development and degree attainment. For more than a decade, leaders in Utah have hosted annual convenings of faculty, administrators, and business leaders to discuss the educational imperatives of the twenty-first century. They have now adapted and are using LEAP materials for their own purposes, reflecting their own state context. The University of Wisconsin System’s Growth Agenda has also used LEAP in its own way, specifically adapting the ELOs and the practices and principles of inclusive excellence as part of a public campaign for the wellbeing of the state.
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 and Applied 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

Reprinted from Association of American Colleges and Universities, College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise, Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, 12. 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. For more information, please visit www.aacu.org/leap.
Providing Resources to Campuses

Campus action in LEAP States makes wide and varied use of LEAP materials. Reflecting decades of direct work with campuses, LEAP States has gained credibility because the campaign lifts up the best that AAC&U can discover on the ground. As AAC&U membership employer surveys have demonstrated, LEAP ELOs are widely recognized as the consensus on learning for the twenty-first century. Highly generative activity on campuses has contributed to the LEAP wealth of resources on implementation: learning-centered curricular designs, engaged learning practices and HIPs (Kuh 2008), and assessment principles and tools, including the rubrics developed by faculty through another LEAP initiative called VALUE (Valid Assessment for Learning in Undergraduate Education) (Rhodes 2010). LEAP has prompted an outpouring of extraordinarily applicable work that faculty, staff, and administrators recognize and respect, a body of materials that systems, states, and regions can adapt and adopt for themselves.

Much of the LEAP activity concentrates on aligned work with the LEAP ELOs, HIPs, and assessment in general education. Statewide engagement with LEAP in Virginia is most evident in the activities of the Virginia Assessment Group, where many campuses are working with VALUE rubrics and ELOs. The Oregon University System has organized shared work across campuses through the leadership of a Learning Outcomes and Assessment work group, commissioned by the Provosts’ Council. The active and engaged learning that LEAP ELOs recommend has helped to fuel interest in HIPs generally. Growing interest in assessment of learning in HIPs has begun to shape research practices that document student success. Shared vocabulary and shared experience with LEAP on campuses multiplies rapidly through networking into system-level approaches to the entire field of work on learning outcomes, HIPs, inclusive excellence, and student success.

LEAP States encourages faculty to engage with student affairs educators and institutional research and assessment staff to document learning beyond the individual course or campus—learning within the state, system, or region. The practice and philosophy of making excellence inclusive likewise requires evidence, disaggregated data that shows learning and engagement across identifiable groups of students, with emphasis on the success of students who have historically been underserved by higher education. LEAP States fosters an interest in equity in systems, in the success of transfer students, first-generation students, underserved students. The initiative is sponsoring work to deepen and develop campus and systemic analyses that can begin with the National Survey of Student Success (NSSE) and Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) data. It is urging faculty to think about the use of VALUE rubrics and electronic portfolios to document learning across institutions and throughout systems. LEAP States has intentionally provided opportunities for faculty across systems to exchange ideas and address challenges related to research on student success.

The LEAP States Initiative provides, in sum,

- A framework for higher-education systems (whether formal entities or collaboratives) to align their programs—system wide and campus wide;
- A national voice for systems, states, and regions within the LEAP campaign;
- Practical advice on large-scale efforts to apply LEAP ELOs and assessment practices such as VALUE;
- A national leadership network for transformational change—models of enabling policy and campus action to make excellence inclusive within and across systems.

In 2005, the University of Wisconsin System became the first system to partner with AAC&U as a LEAP State. Wisconsin has provided valuable lessons and leadership to other systems around the country. In 2008, the California State University and the Oregon University System joined the University of Wisconsin System and AAC&U in the first sponsored project of the LEAP States initiative. Give Students a Compass: A Tri-State LEAP Partnership for College Learning, General Education, and Underserved Student Success (now known as the Compass project) embarked on a voyage of discovery. The Compass project’s animating question: How can systems collaborate with campuses to bring about transformational change in the undergraduate experience? How can systems participate as creative and generative catalysts for change?
Beginning with a set of three beta campuses in each of the three systems, the Compass project began to model the potential of LEAP States. The project enabled campuses to collaborate for student success, using LEAP and emphasizing the centrality of HIPs and the priority of making excellence inclusive.

### High-Impact Educational Practices: A Brief Overview

The following teaching and learning practices have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds. These practices take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics and on institutional priorities and contexts. On many campuses, assessment of student involvement in active learning practices such as these has made it possible to assess the practices’ contribution to students’ cumulative learning. However, on almost all campuses, utilization of active learning practices is unsystematic, to the detriment of student learning. These practices are:

- 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

These practices were first described as a family of “effective educational practices” in AAC&U’s 2007 publication, *College Learning for the New Global Century*. George D. Kuh’s *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, also published by AAC&U, presents research on why these practices are effective, which students have access to them, and, finally, what effect they might have on different cohorts of students.

In the 2010 publication, *Five High-Impact Practices: Research on Learning Outcomes, Completion, and Quality*, authors Jayne E. Brownell and Lynn E. Swaner examine what educational research reveals about five of these practices and explore questions such as: What is the impact on students who participate in these practices? Is the impact the same for both traditional students and those who come from historically underserved student populations? For more information about these publications, see [http://www.aacu.org/publications](http://www.aacu.org/publications).

### “LEAPing” States

In the third year of the project, Compass has become a process that is working systemically, shared and networked among the more than fifty campuses in the three systems. The work has drawn friends, as the essays in this issue of *Peer Review* attest. Colleagues in North Dakota, Utah, and Virginia are “LEAPing” in their own ways, and they are networking with colleagues in California, Oregon, and Wisconsin—as well as in other states, collaboratives, or regions that are thinking of giving this large-scale change work a try.

Are we are moving needles? Longitudinal assessment is under way in many places throughout the initiative. We believe we will see increased achievement of learning outcomes and completion rates ahead. And the preponderance of evidence coalescing from the initiative thus far points to cogent and practical results on various measures of student success. Arguably the most important discovery of the Compass project: while HIPs are beneficial to all students, a single HIP is not sufficient to support student success (Kuh 2008). HIPs scaffolded throughout the curriculum, so that all students have deep and engaged learning experiences multiple times, can and do make a difference. The benefits to underserved students are pronounced. As colleagues active in LEAP join in
work to transform learning for all students and to conduct studies that will provide sufficient evidence to scale, LEAP States continues to make the case, gather the faculty, work from the ground up and from the top down, network and share the results.

People everywhere in the LEAP States initiative know that we are working in an economy of scarcity and through a period of major transformation in higher education. We believe that the creativity unleashed through collaboration can go a long way to address the fact of constrained resources and to test new practices, new tools, and new policies that will help students learn—and learn well. Such new developments as Lumina's Degree Qualifications Profile, for example, can be beta tested by a learning community of a LEAP State. We hope and trust that together we are finding the means to connect high-quality liberal learning and inclusive excellence as the continuity that endures within the change.

The LEAP Campus Toolkit: Resources and Models for Innovation

The LEAP Campus Toolkit is a new online venue for educators to connect to a community of practice. Including an interactive library of campus examples, research narratives, and assessment instruments, the Toolkit provides a virtual space to learn from the work of colleagues in the AAC&U network and to share your own best work with a national audience. Toolkit Resources range from evaluative rubrics to models for using student data in decision making to examples of high-impact practices for student engagement. The Toolkit allows users to leave comments, share resources with colleagues, and submit examples to be highlighted for other practitioners to use in their work. Visit http://leap.aacu.org/toolkit.

References


