

The Competency-Based Approach to Higher Education: Are the AAC&U and Other Organizations Destroying Liberal Traditions?

By Steven C. Ward

Last year the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) celebrated its 100th birthday. Founded in 1915 as the Association of American Colleges (AAC) by a group of presidents from mostly religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges, its high-minded intent was to promote “higher education in all its forms” and “to make more efficient” its member institutions.¹ Historically, the organization garnered a widespread reputation for being at the forefront of expanding and defending the liberal arts, and promoting gender and ethnic equity in colleges and universities across the U.S. Today, its mission remains “to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education,” and it includes some 1,300 research universities, private liberal arts colleges, community

Steven C. Ward is professor of sociology at Western Connecticut State University. His most recent book is *Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education* (Routledge). Additionally, his writings about education reforms have appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Academe*, *Newsweek*, *TruthOut*, and *The Conversation*.

colleges, and regional and state public universities throughout the country.²

Over the past 15 years, the AAC&U has embarked on a new strategy, as evidenced by its slate of initiatives aimed at revising general and liberal education, and embracing a more market-driven, skills or competency-based model of higher education. This strategy, which is supported financially by private foundations like Gates and Lumina, is making these past champions of traditional liberal learning into a major catalyst

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for transforming it, particularly at community colleges and regional state universities where some of the organization's recent liberal- or general-education reform efforts have been targeted. However, in their effort to make liberal learning more marketable, vocational, measurable, competency-centered, and skills-based, are the organization and its allies saving and updating the liberal arts for the economic demands of the 21st century as

they contend? Or are they co-conspirators in efforts that have created distorted assessments and undeserved panic around higher education's performance, and, as a consequence, are key players in the destruction of traditional liberal learning?

THE RISE OF THE COMPETENCY MOVEMENT

Beginning in the early 2000s, a new focus on the connection between liberal learning and skills development began to supplant AAC&U's historical emphasis on inclusion and the importance of the liberal arts in citizenship and public life. This change was likely a defensive response to an era marked by moral hand-wringing over "Beer and Circus" universities that were popularly declaimed to be "Declining by Degrees," and the subsequent neoliberal-inspired global policy frenzy of rhetoric and reform.³ From the mid-1990s onward, a slew of national and international reports came pouring out from groups such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank, the U.K.'s

National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (and its Dearing Report), and the policies of the New Labour government of Tony Blair, each arguing for the importance of skills development for global competition and the inception of a “knowledge society” or economy.⁴ In the U.S., the emphasis on workplace skills and a supposed gap between the needs of corporations and the skills and competencies taught in universities was at the heart of the 2006 report from the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (a.k.a, The Spellings Report), as well as a number of similar reports coming from the National Governors Association and various think tanks.⁵ Following in the rhetoric and neoliberal formula of previous reports from the U.K., these reports argued that the U.S. was falling behind in the global economic race and that the growing “skills gap” was to blame. In the dramatic, business-like language provided in The Spellings Report, the commission members warned that “history is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond to—or even to notice—changes in the world around them, from railroads to steel manufacturers. Without serious self-examination and reform, institutions of higher education risk falling into the same trap, seeing their market share substantially reduced and their services increasingly characterized by obsolescence.”⁶

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Against the backdrop of this growing neoliberal reform movement, the AAC&U, in 2006, released one of its “signature initiatives,” called *Liberal Education and America’s Promise* (LEAP).⁷ LEAP emphasized creating a new “21st century definition of liberal education” that teaches “essential learning outcomes” guided by a set of “principles of excellence.”⁸ This approach, it promised, would “help 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.”⁹ These ideas were put forward not just as a new version of the vague, ill-defined, older notion of the liberal arts, but as measurable and transferable skills that students could showcase to future employers. In this model, content knowledge, although still mentioned, takes a back seat to the generic soft and hard skills, such as communication and creative thinking, that liberal education should provide students for job placement. As Carol Schneider, the former president of the organization, framed

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it when AAC&U voiced its support for the Common Core State Standards in 2014, “Too many states are still relying on standards that reflect an outmoded model of education—one that is more focused on knowledge acquisition than higher-level critical thinking and problem-solving.... Today’s students and the future of our economy and our democracy depend on significant reforms both in K-12 education and higher education.”¹⁰

In the second phase of LEAP, introduced in 2009, this new skills-based and business-friendly version of liberal learning sought to move from conceptualization to operationalization through something called the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE).¹¹ (Yes, they do love acronyms!) The goals of VALUE reflected a growing emphasis in higher education policy and administration on Total Quality Management, a philosophy of management popularized by car manufacturers and others in the 1980s, which focuses on so-called continuous improvement, data-driven production, and quality circles. Here it was necessary “to provide needed tools to assess students’ own authentic work, produced across their diverse learning pathways and institutions, to determine whether and how well they are progressing toward graduation-level achievement in learning outcomes that both employers and faculty consider essential.”¹² In this phase of implementation, these measurement initiatives were generally seen as unique to each campus and locally controlled. Member institutions were encouraged to derive

their own rubrics and assessments to accurately measure the value-added skills and competencies, as defined by the institutions, obtained through exposure to liberal education. However, many who used VALUE seemed to simply copy the examples and typologies provided by the AAC&U.¹³

As we move into the current decade, the orientation of the AAC&U shifts again. What began as campus-based reforms that were designed to be locally measurable, now become closely linked with the broader, more politically motivated initiatives of venture philanthropy groups such as the Lumina Foundation and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and what is popularly known as the foundations' college completion agenda. This approach seeks to use competency-based and online education, as well as the standardization and measurement of student learning outcomes, to reform university curricula and move more people to more degrees

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more quickly and cheaply. It is typified by the approach of Southern New Hampshire University's College for America (CfA), a 2-year-old program that offers online bachelor's degrees to students who progress through the program at their own speed, according to their job-oriented "competencies," and likely pay less than \$10,000 for that degree.¹⁴ Gates has supported CfA, and competency-based education, in general.¹⁵ In fact, since 2009, it has provided more than \$14 million to directly support competency-based education, including \$9.6 million to Western Governors University, the online competency-based university formed in 1995.¹⁶ Gates' enthusiasm for competency-based education is matched by the Lumina Foundation, which was created when the non-profit USA Group sold its holdings to the for-profit student loan guarantor Sallie Mae (now Navient). According to Lumina, it is important to take "advantage of the proliferation of competency-based models and open courseware to create new pathways to degrees... (and) expanding the availability of prior learning assessment and other approaches to accelerate progress toward degrees."¹⁷

In its latest push, the rhetoric and actions of the AAC&U increasingly has become indistinguishable from Gates and Lumina, the so-called disruptive innovators trying to remake the academy in the names of efficiency, productivity, and marketization. Indeed, Gates, Lumina, and others have become major funders of the organization's initiatives, and Lumina even previously held a seat on the AAC&U Board of Directors.¹⁸ This funding includes \$2.3 million from Gates in 2013, \$1.2 million from

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Lumina in 2014, plus additional money from EDUCAUSE, the promoters of the "Next Generation Learning Challenges Initiative" that promotes what they call "applied technology" and "personalized learning" to increase college completion rates.¹⁹ Since 2010, EDUCAUSE has received over \$50 million from Gates.²⁰

Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that the ongoing activities of the AAC&U center on promoting

competency-based education and student assessment experiments at different sites around the country. For example, in its "New Initiative Employing VALUE Rubrics to Assess Student Achievement of Key Learning Outcomes" (tough to find an acronym here) launched in the summer of 2014, participating institutions are using the VALUE rubrics to better standardize what students should know. All but seven of the 69 participating institutions are community or regional public universities, none are private liberal arts colleges or among the most elite research institutions.²¹ This initiative is being coordinated by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, which is composed of various state college or university presidents or politically appointed members of boards of regents and trustees. Some of these officers, such as those in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system and, until recently, the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, have been pushing for major reforms to higher education in their states through online education and an emphasis on competencies and skills—with strong resistance from

faculty in both systems.²² This particular intuitive is also being paid for with a grant from the Gates Foundation.²³

At the same time, AAC&U also is initiating another Gates-funded initiative called General Education Maps and Markers (GEM) that “represents a large-scale, systematic effort to provide ‘design principles’ for 21st-century learning and long-term student success.”²⁴ Such an approach is quite similar to the “best elements of standards-related work” rhetoric found in Common Core.²⁵ GEM draws upon the organization’s “longstanding work in liberal education to develop a portable and proficiency-based framework for general education that helps all students, and especially those who have been traditionally underserved by higher education, learn most effectively and demonstrate and apply their learning outside the classroom.”²⁶

This latest initiative is basically the operationalization of the Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile, and it contains a clever class-based recoding common among education reformers who use the eduspeak of “serving the underserved” and “establishing new avenues of inclusion” to actually mean a fast, cheap, and dumbed-down version of liberal learning.²⁷

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THE OUTCOME OF COMPETENCIES ON LIBERAL LEARNING

By emphasizing marketable skills over knowledge content, the AAC&U and their competency partners, Lumina and Gates, are forcing students, particularly those in lower-tier public institutions, into a compromised version of liberal learning. Make no mistake, this is not a liberal education as envisioned by Socrates, Cardinal Newman, Wilhelm von Humboldt, J.S. Mill, or other defenders of broader liberal learning and knowledge that is dedicated to freeing the mind and that has been

served up for generations at premier public institutions. It is solely for job training and skill development. Despite their rhetoric of “serving the underserved” and “closing the skills gap,” AAC&U and its partners are contributing to divisions between a broadly educated elite and narrowly educated workers. These groups are responsible for generating new hierarchies between those who receive a cheap, fast liberal education, and those who receive a quality one. Indeed, they are forging barriers and new

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strata, not removing them. Such a strategy stands in marked contrast to the organization’s past emphasis on quality, across-the-board liberal learning, regardless of the type of student or institution. In this new model those in wealthy liberal arts colleges will go on receiving broad liberal training as a core part to their university experience, while those at lower tier institutions will be loaded up with skills and com-

petencies that align with company needs at a given moment.²⁸

While AAC&U’s version of competencies may have started independently as a way to defend the liberal arts from the forces of market-based reforms threatening to wash over higher education in the first decade of the 21st century, today its rhetoric and ideas have become basically indistinguishable from the “disruptors” who are either trying to bury liberal education or turn it into a competency and skills check list. Locally driven, shared governance style reforms, once a hallmark of AAC&U’s efforts, have all but disappeared. They too have now become just another aspect of the standardized and entrepreneurial university. In these endeavors the AAC&U is largely blind to, or is deliberately ignoring, what their policies look like when they hit the reality of today’s political climate and the swirl of reformers circling higher education. The organization, like its private benefactors, has adopted the strategy that Frank Coffield described as “running even faster down the wrong road.”²⁹ Rather than defending the idea of liberal knowledge and the importance of knowledge content that is critical to the development of personal growth, economic

innovation and political participation, they seek to throw in the towel and join the competency reform fray. They are either politically naïve about how their ideas intersect and fuel other agendas, or they are willing to sacrifice a good chunk of their members, perhaps all but the very elite liberal arts colleges, research universities and students, to the money and political agenda of the higher education reform gods.

Ironically, the implementation of the skills and competencies movement at American universities and colleges is occurring just as the U.K., one of the originators of these ideas, appears to be abandoning its past emphasis on skills and moving back toward knowledge content.³⁰ Perhaps this signals that Kant's enlightenment call of *Sapere aude* (Dare to know) still has a future after all. If that is the case, maybe the AAC&U, as it enters its second century of existence, can divert and return to its roots of being a champion for the liberal arts for all. However, this would require a dramatic and broader shift away from the neoliberal economic focus that has dominated education policy at all levels and in many national contexts for the last three decades. The recent move to support free public university education in the U.S. may signal that such a political shift is just beginning. [nea](#)

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ENDNOTES

1. Association of American Colleges. "The Constitution."
2. AAC&U, "Mission Statement" and "About AAC&U." Among its 25 current board members, 18 are current university presidents, provosts or chancellors, while its officers—a past chair, vice-chair, and treasurer—are currently university presidents.
3. See Sperber, *Beer and Circus: How Big Time Sports is Crippling Undergraduate College Education*; and Glasser, et al., *Declining by Degrees*.
4. Westwood, "Skills and New Labour."
5. Commission Appointed by Margaret Spellings, *A Report of the Commission Appointed by Margaret Spellings*.
6. *Ibid.* p. ix.

7. AAC&U, "Liberal Education and America's Promise."
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Higher Ed for Higher Standards, "AAC&U Joins Higher Ed for Higher Standards."
11. AAC&U, "Value."
12. *Ibid.*
13. For an example of this, see Kansas State University's rubrics at <https://www.k-state.edu/assessment/valuerubrics/>.
14. See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/05/06/college-america-hits-10000-mark-new-competency-based-bachelors-degrees>.
15. College for America, *A Milestone for Competency-Based Higher Ed*.
16. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, "Awarded Grants." See also Neem, "A University Without Intellectuals: Western Governors University and the Academy's Future," pp. 63-79.
17. Lumina Foundation, *Strategic Plan 2013*.
18. AAC&U, "Donors to AAC&U."
19. AAC&U, "Launches Initiatives to Advance Transformative Change in General Education and Student Learning Assessment"; Lumina Foundation, "Grants 2014"; Educause, "Next Generation Learning Challenges"; and AAC&U, "Donors to AAC&U."
20. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, "Awarded Grants."
21. AAC&U, "68 Institutions in Nine States to Pilot New Approach to Learning Outcomes Assessment."
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. AAC&U, "General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs)."
25. Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Read the Standards."
26. AAC&U, "General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs)."
27. The DQP is Lumina's attempt to use learning outcomes to codify what students should have learned upon graduation from a university. For a discussion of the political roots and orientation of the Lumina Foundation see Painter, "The Libertarian Roots of the Lumina Foundation, Part I."
28. Ward, "Let Them Eat Cake (Competently)."
29. Coffield, *Running Even Faster Down the Wrong Road*.
30. Morgan, *Why Knowledge Matters*.

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