

# Broader Skill Sets Needed

by Marilyn Gilroy

**T**oo many of today's college graduates lack the skills to succeed in our global economy, according to a recent poll of more than 300 business executives. By large numbers (63 percent), employers surveyed believe that colleges and universities need to place more emphasis on helping students acquire broad knowledge, intellectual and practical skills, and personal and social responsibility. They also want more integration and application of learning to real-world situations.

Those are among the conclusions of *College Learning for the New Global Century*, a recent report by the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), a 10-year initiative convened by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to bring together high-level business, education, labor, philanthropy, and policy leaders to chart a way forward for higher education.

The recommendations for new learning outcomes are aimed at all sectors of higher education, including two-year institutions, small private colleges, and large universities.

"There has been a near-total public silence about what contemporary college graduates need to know and be able to do," states the report, released earlier this year.

The report is based on the results of two extensive national polls of business leaders, plus focus groups of employers across the country, exploring the relationship between liberal education and the demands of the new economy. Carol Geary Schneider, president of AAC&U, says that "on the whole, employers think that higher education isn't sufficiently rigorous and that too many students earn a diploma without really getting a good education."

Essentially, the report states that employers want graduates with a breadth of cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills, not just a narrow focus on one specialty. It addresses the need to move away from narrow preparation in a single area, whether it is chemistry, history, or information technology, dubbing that as "exactly the opposite of what graduates need from

college." While in-depth study remains an important part of the overall pattern for college learning, focusing on one specialty is far from enough.

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The poll also found that employers want colleges to place more emphasis on issues such as science and technology, global developments, and teamwork skills in diverse groups. Just 22 percent want colleges to focus narrowly on providing students with skills and knowledge in a specific field; and 76 percent recommend that a young person get a four-year college education that provides both broad knowledge in a variety of areas and in-depth knowledge in a specific major or field.

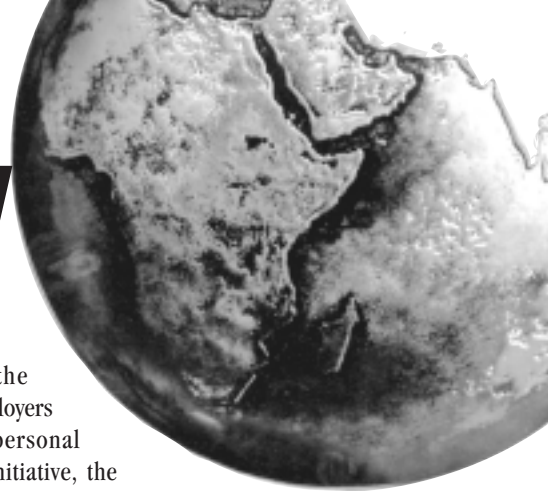
"It's time to stop channeling students into narrow tracks that prepare them for an initial job but not for tomorrow's challenges," said Schneider. "Engineers need to know how to communicate across diverse cultures; scientists need to think through the ethical implications of their work; and computer programmers need to understand the real-world conditions that shape the lives of those who will use their programs and products. A college education must give students more than technical knowledge; it should help them succeed in all aspects of work and life."

So what kinds of learning outcomes are employers looking for from college graduates?

Business leaders say competencies that were once considered essential when dealing with regional

or national economies are no longer as relevant in the economy without borders. The LEAP report summarizes their suggestions, which call for college students to develop a set of higher-level skills derived from a comprehensive liberal education. The recommended outcomes are divided into four categories: knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world; intellectual and practical skills including critical thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, teamwork, and problem solving; personal and social responsibility, including local and global civic

# in Global Economy



knowledge; integrative learning including applying knowledge and skills to new settings.

To produce graduates who are proficient in these areas, colleges must develop strategies for integrating international perspectives on campuses, encouraging an understanding of foreign cultures and fostering the ability to think critically within a global context. In other words, employers need individuals who have the ability to do “the big picture” thinking as well as the capabilities to get the job done.

*College Learning for the New Global Century* identifies a series of effective educational practices that colleges and universities should adopt and provide to far more students than currently have access to them. They include freshmen seminars and experiences; common intellectual experiences; learning communities; writing-intensive courses; collaborative assignments and projects, “Science as science is done”/undergraduate research; diversity/global learning; service learning, community-based learning; internships; and capstone courses and projects.

## Basics Skills and Practical Experience Still Matter

Although the LEAP report deals with general principles and practices, it does not exclude the continuing need for basic competencies, such as strong mathematics and communication skills.

“Employers, virtually without exception, want employees who can write well,” said Schneider. “But we have heard universal lamentations that effective writing is in short supply.”

These findings and subsequent recommendations come as no surprise to Marilyn Mackes, executive director of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). NACE conducts an annual job-outlook survey to determine what characteristics and skills employers are looking for in potential employees.

“For more than 10 years, we’ve asked employers about key skills, and they have consistently named communication skills as critical yet have also said this is something many candidates lack,” said Mackes.

But the ideal candidate needs to be more than an articulate straight

arrow, according to the NACE survey results. Employers also cited strong interpersonal skills, motivation and initiative, the

ability to work well with others, and a strong work ethic as key attributes.

“Certainly, having the requisite skill-set to perform the duties of the job is critical, but much of what employers prize can’t be taught in the classroom,” says Mackes. “As a result, they look for evidence that the candidate has these ‘soft skills’ and attributes. This is one reason why employers look for new college graduates who have gained some kind of relevant work experience, typically performed through an internship or cooperative education program.”

This complements the LEAP report recommendation that students need educational practices that will help them integrate and apply learning to the actual demands of work. As they move through their studies, students should have the opportunity to grapple with real-world situations. This means assignments that ask them to define the task, explain its significance, test solutions, and take actions based on their judgments.

Dr. Roanne Angiello, who teaches business courses at Bergen Community College in New Jersey, says it is important to create assignments that help students cultivate skills to make informed practical judgments.

“Every week, I require that students do a case study with practical applications,” she said. “Sometimes it is as simple as comparing the financial implications of buying versus leasing a car. Other times, we delve deeply into analyzing a current problem, such as whether or not a business should adopt telecommuting options for managers. Students must compare the pros and cons, and the costs versus the benefits, for both the company and employees.”

Employers indicated that they place a high value on these kinds of analytical and problem-solving skills. But they also want graduates who have strong teamwork skills, especially those needed to work in diverse groups. Most companies now have diverse work forces, so even day-to-day work groups are likely to include members from differ-



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## 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

Source: AAC&U

comprehend the international dimensions of their major field of study. According to Angiello, that is one of the most important concepts – and one of the most difficult – to get across to her students. Many of them express the belief that the U.S. can insulate or protect itself from trends, such as outsourcing, that are impacting business.

“I tell them that we can’t close our borders and that our economy is constantly affected by global trends, whether it is cheap labor, the price of oil, or the price of steel, which is impacted by the building wave in China,” she said.

To get students to think beyond national boundaries, Angiello explains that she and her colleagues use projects that change the focus to a global perspective. She described one of the projects used by an instructor in the business department.

“The students had to select a country, and gather as much economic, political, and cultural data as possible about that country,” she said. “Then they had to pick a business to start in that country or develop a strategy to help a U.S. company do business with that country.”

Using this approach gives college students a chance to have exciting and powerful learning experiences that ultimately provide them with the knowledge, versatility, and creativity essential to help companies maintain a cutting edge. The LEAP report describes today’s economy as one in which “every industry – from the trades to advanced technology enterprises – is challenged to innovate or be displaced.”

For this reason, businesses need college graduates who can bring a new perspective to the workplace. The NACE survey confirms that more than three-quarters of employees look to college graduates for their ability to provide fresh ideas and to contribute to the need for continuous innovation that is so much a part of today’s business environment.

“Companies are counting on college graduates to inject new ideas and to help sow the seeds for the future success of their organizations,” said Mackes.

Because this need is so critical, Schneider says that businesses approach recruiting with an interest in the knowledge that graduates bring but also for the potential that they demonstrate.

“What employers really want to know is whether an individual is a good learner, whether he or she has the curiosity and drive to grow with the organization, and whether that person has the intellectual agility to tackle new challenges as they emerge and to help turn those problems into opportunities,” she said.

ent cultural backgrounds, which can lead to missteps when it comes to communication styles and language barriers. Knowing this, many faculty members are making group work the core of their teaching and learning.

“We talk a great deal about cultural differences, especially between managers and employees,” said Angiello. “I also use groups throughout the semester, and I make sure that students change groups frequently so that they must adapt to a changing mix of individuals. Because our community college has a very diverse student body, it is excellent training for the workplace.”

At the heart of the LEAP recommendations is the mandate that graduates need to have a diverse and knowledgeable view of the world, and they must

