Foreword

High-Impact Practices
Retrospective and Prospective

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Since the appearance of my 2008 Association of American Colleges and Universities
(AAC&U) monograph, High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them,
and Why They Matter, it's been gratifying to see the growing interest expressed by administrators,
faculty, and staff in learning more about high-impact practices. In part, this animated
groundswell—evidenced by attendance at sessions related to this topic at national and regional
meetings and institutional workshops—prompted AAC&U to ask Jayne Brownell and Lynn
Swaner to delve more deeply into the research that supports the general pattern of findings
associated with the ten high-impact practices identified in the 2007 AAC&U Liberal Education
and America's Promise (LEAP) report, College Learning for the New Global Century. The fruit of
their labor—this monograph—furthers our understanding of and appreciation for the potential
of such practices to enhance the learning and personal development of all students, especially
those from historically underrepresented groups and those who appear, by traditional measures
of precollege achievement, to be underprepared for college-level work. One of the keys to
meeting this challenge successfully is determining what works in engaging students more
meaningfully in college-level learning.

Over the past decade, I've had many occasions to talk with higher education and popular media
writers about this and related topics. The questions most often asked of me relate in one way or
another to the things a college could do to boost student engagement. After a time, I began
bouncing the question back to the interviewers, asking them to tell me what really made a
difference for them in terms of their own learning and personal development. Almost to a
person, their answers were tied in some way to writing for their institution's student newspaper
or literary magazine or some other venue that gave them a space to practice, apply, and
showcase their composition skills.
As these anecdotes began to pile up, I got to thinking about the parallels with some of my own undergraduate experiences. For a time I was the so-called “anonymous” author of the “Headless Norseman” column for the Luther College student newspaper, CHIPS. While I spent a lot of time (not always efficiently) preparing my writing assignments—especially for my major field coursework in English and history—I almost always got into the flow when conceptualizing, researching, and writing the Headless column. In fact, one of the undergraduate artifacts of which I am most proud is my CHIPS Valentine’s Day column; other than my senior project paper, my recollection is that I spent as much time on that column as on other papers I wrote during those years. Although my college newspaper does not compare favorably in terms of advertising revenues or distribution numbers to the Harvard Crimson or the Stanford Daily, my consternation nevertheless peaked when the CHIPS editor in chief cut about a third of my sterling prose because of space limitations!

What is it about my experiences, and those of dozens of national and regional reporters, that makes them stand out so that we readily recall and describe them as especially memorable and important to our lives, then and now? For starters, these activities demanded high-quality work under pressure in real time, in a congenial setting where feedback was plentiful, typically challenging, and often overheard by others. Equally important, the quality of the product was judged by others (often peers) before appearing, and was later evaluated by public opinion. Moreover, producing the material required a dedicated investment of time and energy—at least as much, and by some accounts much more, than was either demanded by or devoted to academic assignments. In other words, what my reporter–colleagues were describing and what I experienced myself is what today we are calling a high-impact activity—an investment of time and energy over an extended period that has unusually positive effects on student engagement in educationally purposeful behavior.

The idea that some programs and practices confer such positive benefits on students in terms of their overall engagement and self-reported outcomes emerged during an in–depth analysis of the relationships between several of the items that are included in the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). We found early on, for example, not only that participation in one of these programs—a learning community—was related to higher levels of engagement in the first college year, but also that this elevated level of effort persisted through the senior year (Zhao and Kuh 2004). The more we probed into other programs and practices, the clearer this positive picture became, including strong links to NSSE self-reported gains—the skills students feel they have gained from attending college, including analytical reasoning and writing. Some of these self-reported gains from NSSE are proxies for some of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see page ix). LEAP is AAC&U’s national initiative that champions the importance of a twenty-first-century liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality, and the essential learning outcomes, first described in the LEAP report (2007), provide a framework to guide students’ cumulative progress through college. After more
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

Note: 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. The findings are documented in previous publications of the Association of American Colleges and Universities: Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning at a Nation Goes to College (2002), Taking Responsibility for Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree (2004), and Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Achievement in College (2005).
extensive examination of the NSSE findings—including several sets of experimental items that allowed us to learn more about service learning, student–faculty research, study abroad, internships, and senior culminating experiences—we were convinced that we were onto something, having discovered some patterns in the data that began to explain how and why participating in such activities was beneficial.

It is reassuring that the conclusions Brownell and Swaner draw from the published research essentially affirm the relationships between the high-impact practices and selected dimensions of student success, persistence, and changes in attitudes and behaviors. As with any literature review, their work represents a snapshot in time—in this instance through 2009. Just in the past year, new findings from the Wabash National Longitudinal Study on Liberal Arts Education show that the good practices in undergraduate education that constitute many of the conditions at the foundation of the high-impact practices have unusually positive effects after controlling for precollege differences (Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich 2010; Seifert et al. 2010).

**The Next Frontier**

Brownell and Swaner suggest that sewing several high-impact practices into one activity may further magnify the positive impact of the experience. For example, imagine what the student experience would be like if all first-year students at your institution took a small (twenty-five students or fewer) writing- or inquiry-intensive seminar with common readings and a service-learning component. Students would have intellectual experiences in common to discuss as they walk together to and from class, to the residence hall, campus union, or parking lot. Every student would know a faculty member well and have more than a few classmates to study with. Linking this course to one or two others taken by the same students would create the kind of learning community that Brownell and Swaner remind us might well strengthen the social bonds among the students and that, in turn, will enhance their sense of belonging and support—conditions typically associated with higher persistence and satisfaction levels. In fact, some of the institutions participating in the Documenting Effective Educational Practices project, which was profiled in *Student Success in College*, used some of these high-octane approaches, such as the First-Year Seminar at Wheaton College, the Common Intellectual Experience at Ursinus College, and the Entering Student Program at the University of Texas at El Paso (Kuh et al. 2005).

While stitching together two or more high-impact practices would likely enhance their effect, NSSE data suggest that participating in any one high-impact activity can boost engagement and even yield compensatory benefits to students who most need the help, such as those from historically underrepresented groups and those who are less well-prepared for college (Kuh 2008). The Wabash National Longitudinal Study of Liberal Arts Education reports similar results (Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich 2010; Seifert et al. 2010). To explain in part why these practices
work so well, I posited six student behaviors that the ten LEAP high-impact practices induce (Kuh 2008, 14–17):

1. investing time and effort

2. interacting with faculty and peers about substantive matters

3. experiencing diversity

4. responding to more frequent feedback

5. reflecting and integrating learning

6. discovering relevance of learning through real-world applications

It is the combination of these behaviors that make these practices so powerful. And there are other educationally powerful conditions that may well be worthy of the label “high-impact.” Recent NSSE (2009) findings related to writing courses and student–faculty research point to two such conditions associated with high levels of engagement and desired outcomes. The first condition is setting appropriate expectations for the activity. In the context, for example, of student–faculty research, this requires clarifying for students what their role will be at various stages in the inquiry process. Those students who are actively involved in determining the objectives of the research and at other points in conducting the research—reviewing the literature, collecting data, writing up the results, presenting the findings in different venues—benefit much more from the experience than those students whose role is limited to collecting data. The second condition is public demonstration of what one can do, as is often expected in a capstone or other form of senior culminating experience. This can take various forms in which students, in a structured way, synthesize and integrate what they have learned and, through the completion and presentation of a project, examination, or set of artifacts accompanied by a self-reflective essay, show what they can do with the information, competencies, and skills they have gained.

It stands to reason that these key conditions can be adapted and incorporated into any teaching and learning situation inside or outside the classroom to promote higher levels of student performance. As I mentioned at the outset, there are doubtless other high-impact activities, in addition to writing for the campus newspaper, in which large numbers of students participate. Some that come to mind are participation in intercollegiate athletics and touring bands, choirs, and other musical and theatrical groups, all of which are accompanied by frequent feedback from “experts” (coaches, directors) that have immediate consequences and that affect the performance of others.
There is a risk, certainly, of assuming certain practices or activities are “high-impact” in the absence of either strong empirical support or a compelling theoretical rationale. And so I join with Brownell and Swaner in urging that more research be done to determine what practices and what aspects of those practices seem either to have the greatest overall impact or are associated with especially robust outcomes. In the meantime, we now know enough to urge faculty and staff to find ways to adapt and sew these and other good liberal arts educational practices into teaching and learning settings, inside and outside the classroom and on and off the campus. In addition to the classroom, lab, or studio, the other venue in which a large majority of students find themselves is the workplace.

**Can We Make Employment a High-Impact Activity?**

By one estimate, two-thirds of students at four-year institutions and four-fifths of their counterparts at two-year institutions work during college (Horn and Nevill 2006). Is it possible to structure certain aspects of the employment experience—especially on-campus, but also off-campus employment—so that work enriches, rather than competes with or is orthogonal to, an institution's learning goals for its students? I believe this is doable, if faculty and staff systematically create the conditions characteristic of the high-impact practices identified in the LEAP report. In our most recent analysis of NSSE data, working either on or off campus was found to be positively related to several dimensions of student engagement, especially for full-time students (McCormick, Moore, and Kuh 2010). Unsurprisingly, students who worked on campus generally benefitted more than their counterparts who worked off campus. But contrary to expectations, some of the stronger positive effects on engagement were experienced by full-time students who worked more than twenty hours per week on campus. On balance, the benefits of working during college appear to be mediated by student engagement. This suggests that one potentially productive way to optimize the positive benefits of work and study is to induce students intentionally to connect what they are learning in class with experiences in the work setting. How might this be done?

One approach is to bring together small groups of students who work in the same office or functional area to reflect systematically on and discuss how what they have experienced or learned on the job informs or connects to their studies, presently or in the past. Similarly, students can be encouraged to think about how what they are learning in class and elsewhere informs or is helpful to their job or advances or clarifies their career aspirations. Engaging students in this kind of reflection may be difficult initially, because such connections will not always be immediately apparent—especially to those holding what might be considered less intellectually challenging positions, such as in food service or as office assistants. Indeed, my own experience is that most students will have little to say in the first and even the second meetings. To jump-start the discussion, it can be helpful for an upper-division student who is articulate on these matters to participate. Over the course of several sessions, after hearing some others talk about their experiences, most, if not all, students will likely begin to make
connections between their work experiences and their studies. And the more practice students have doing this, the better they will get at these challenging tasks of reflection, integration, and synthesis. Such high-level cognitive skills are best acquired through modeling, practice, feedback, and more practice and feedback. Through such conversations, students may well deepen their understanding of their values and long-term goals—a behavior that is also positively linked to student persistence and other measures of success in college. Equally important, students will have made important strides toward becoming reflective practitioners, a necessary attribute for lifelong learning. Lee Shulman eloquently articulated this long-term benefit of engagement:

Learning begins with student engagement, which in turn leads to knowledge and understanding. Once someone understands, he or she becomes capable of performance or action. Critical reflection on one’s practice and understanding leads to higher-order thinking in the form of a capacity to exercise judgment in the face of uncertainty and to create designs in the presence of constraints and unpredictability. Ultimately, the exercise of judgment makes possible the development of commitment. In commitment, we become capable of professing our understandings and our values, our faith and our love, our skepticism and our doubts, internalizing those attributes and making them integral to our identities. These commitments, in turn, make new engagements possible—and even necessary... [Thus] engagement is not solely a proxy; it can also be an end in itself. Our institutions of higher education are settings where students can encounter a range of people and ideas and human experiences that they have never been exposed to before. Engagement in this sense is not just a proxy for learning but a fundamental purpose of education (Shulman 2002, 38).

LAST WORD

High-impact practices are developmentally powerful because they combine and concentrate other empirically validated pedagogical approaches into a single multidimensional activity that unfolds over an extended period of time. These practices are at the heart of a liberal education. Equally important, all the evidence so far suggests that they benefit all students. At the same time, while promising, they are not a panacea. Only when they are implemented well and continually evaluated to be sure they are accessible to and reaching all students will we realize their considerable potential.