

Signature Work

The goal of the Signature Work project is to prepare students to integrate and apply their learning to a significant project completed across a semester of study or longer.

Signature Work can be pursued in a research project, in a capstone experience, in thematically linked courses, in a practicum, or in service learning settings. Signature Work will always include substantial writing, reflection on learning, and visible results. Many students will use e-portfolios to present and explain their Signature Work and related learning outcomes.

Signature Work is designed to prepare students—both at the community college and bachelor’s levels—to work with unscripted problems. Directly influenced by research on “high-impact practices,” Signature Work is a centerpiece of AAC&U’s LEAP Challenge effort to set twenty-first-century standards for quality learning in college.

At their best, Signature Work projects are related to a question or problem that is important to the student and important to society. For many, these projects will be career related; for others, they will be related to significant societal challenges such as health, literacy, sustainability, or human dignity. For all, Signature Work allows students to connect liberal and general learning with the world beyond college.

In doing Signature Work, students take the lead—with faculty guidance and supervision—and produce work that expresses insights gained from the inquiry. Signature Work also can help students demonstrate achievement of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and their ability to integrate learning from multiple sources.

In 2015, in the context of its Centennial Year, AAC&U will select a set of institutions—public and private, two-year and four-year—that want to remap their own curricular pathways to engage their students in Signature Work. Some may work on redesigning general education programs or capstone requirements. Some may work to create curricula and teaching practices that prepare students for Signature Work.

These LEAP Challenge institutions will become partners with AAC&U in showing how Signature Work can become essential and expected, rather than available but optional. Key partners in AAC&U’s efforts to make excellence inclusive rather than exclusive, LEAP Challenge institutions will become leaders in developing new connections between liberal and general education, the needs of today’s students, and the needs of society.

The Signature Work initiative will be directly connected to other LEAP Challenge projects, including LEAP States, Roadmap, GEMs, STIRS, and VALUE.



WHY DO STUDENTS NEED SIGNATURE WORK?

Today’s students will participate in a global economy fueled by successful innovation, and they will engage with diverse communities that need solutions to intractable problems. This demands an education that explores issues from multiple perspectives and across disciplines, and that helps students apply what they learn to real-world situations. Recent research indicates that only one third of today’s graduates complete capstone work. Only about 20 percent of students report doing undergraduate research. More than half do an internship and/or service learning, but they do not always show what they learned from these potentially powerful experiences. When students do engage in these kinds of “high-impact” experiences, they are more likely to complete college, are more engaged in their work, and show higher levels of deep and integrative learning.

For more information, see www.aacu.org/signaturework.

SELECTED SIGNATURE WORK RESOURCES

Falling Short: Employers’ Views on College Graduates’ Preparation for Work (2015)

Ensuring Quality and Taking High-Impact Practices to Scale (2013)

Signature Work will be supported with funds from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, The Charles Engelhard Foundation, TG Philanthropy, and donors to AAC&U’s Centennial Fund.

