

# The Learning Students Need for the Twenty-First Century

These barriers to quality notwithstanding, there is hope on the horizon. College faculties across the country are beginning to adopt new practices that raise the level of student effort and achievement. The Greater Expectations National Panel report and its attendant Web site ([www.greaterexpectations.org](http://www.greaterexpectations.org)) highlight many such promising innovations.

The key to successful reform is a clear focus on the kinds of learning that students need for a complex world. The panel urges an invigorated and practical liberal education as the most empowering form of learning for the twenty-first century. It makes strong recommendations about the knowledge and capacities all students should acquire—regardless of backgrounds, fields, or chosen higher education institutions.

The report further recommends that these goals for students' liberal education become the shared concern of both school and college. The transition from high school to college should be considered a joint responsibility of schools and higher education; it should be carefully planned. The learning outcomes needed in this new era can only be achieved when all parts of the educational experience address them.

Students will continue to pursue different specializations in college. But across all fields, the panel calls for higher education to help college students become intentional learners who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from different sources, and continue learning throughout their lives. To thrive in a complex world, these intentional learners should also become:

**EMPOWERED** through the mastery of intellectual and practical skills

**INFORMED** by knowledge about the natural and social worlds and about forms of inquiry basic to these studies

**RESPONSIBLE** for their personal actions and for civic values.

*The empowered learner.* The intellectual and practical skills that students need are extensive, sophisticated, and expanding with the explosion of new technologies. As they progress through grades K-12 and the undergraduate years, and at successively more challenging levels, students should learn to:

effectively communicate orally, visually, in writing, and in a second language

understand and employ quantitative and qualitative analysis to solve

problems

interpret and evaluate information from a variety of sources

understand and work within complex systems and with diverse groups  
demonstrate intellectual agility and the ability to manage change  
transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment  
and action.

*The informed learner.* While intellectual and practical skills are essential, so is a deeper understanding of the world students inherit, as human beings and as contributing citizens. This knowledge extends beyond core concepts to include ways of investigating human society and the natural world. Both in school and college, students should have sustained opportunities to learn about:

the human imagination, expression, and the products of many cultures  
the interrelations within and among global and cross-cultural communities  
means of modeling the natural, social, and technical worlds  
the values and histories underlying U.S. democracy.

*The responsible learner.* The integrity of a democratic society depends on citizens' sense of social responsibility and ethical judgment.

To develop these qualities, education should foster:  
intellectual honesty  
responsibility for society's moral health and for social justice  
active participation as a citizen of a diverse democracy  
discernment of the ethical consequences of decisions and actions  
deep understanding of one's self and respect for the complex identities of  
others, their histories, and their cultures.

Taken together, these outcomes form the core of a twenty-first century liberal education—liberal not in any political sense, but in terms of liberating and opening the mind, and of preparing students for responsible action. The panel calls for a new national commitment to provide an excellent liberal education to all students, not just those attending elite institutions and not just those studying traditional arts and sciences disciplines. Professional studies—such as business, education, health sciences, technologies—should also be approached as liberal education.

In this spirit, the report urges an end to the traditional, artificial distinctions between liberal and practical education. Liberal education in all fields will have the strongest impact when studies look beyond the classroom to the world's major questions, asking students to apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment to significant problems in the world around them. By valuing cooperative as well as individual performance, diversity as a resource for learning, real solutions to unscripted problems, and creativity as well as critical

thinking, this newly pragmatic liberal education will both prepare students for a dynamic economy and build civic capacity at home and abroad.

Source: Greater Expectations National Panel Report