If “the time has come” for measuring student-learning outcomes and holding institutions accountable for ensuring that their graduates have learned what they need to know and to be able to do, how do we know when that has been achieved? What is a learned person?

Much of the criticism around focusing on student-learning outcomes falls into three arguments.

- **Argument 1**: Real learning is beyond the realm of assessment. This is the Pirsig argument, presented earlier: “you know what it is, but you don’t know what it is.” For all practical purposes, the real quality of learning is beyond measurement.

- **Argument 2**: Measuring quality almost of necessity leads to focusing on the wrong stuff. This argument brings together the cautions of two American icons, Albert Einstein, who said that “not everything that counts can be measured, and not everything that can be measured counts,” and Peter Drucker who stated that “what gets measured gets managed.”

- **Argument 3**: The proof of the quality of American higher education is in the pudding (or perhaps more accurately, in the market). More students come to the U.S. from elsewhere to pursue an education than go anywhere else. The market tells us that we are good, and we don’t need other more artificial measures.

Fortunately, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has focused substantial attention on the issues around establishing standards for student-learning outcomes and around the assessment thereof. Its seminal work, reflected in *Greater Expectations: Project on Accreditation and Assessment*, has helped many institutions throughout the country, including many in the West, to develop their internal efforts to assess the level of student learning. This has assisted those institutions not only in their external accreditation reviews but also in their internal struggles to better understand their students and the complexity of student learning.

We have invited Debra Humphreys, AAC&U’s vice president for communications and public affairs, to share with you some of what AAC&U has learned about what constitutes a college-educated person and how institutions, and perhaps even states, can better understand how well they contribute to making sure that their graduates have the learning required to fit this bill.
Speaker: Debra Humphreys, vice president, Office of Communications and Public Affairs, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Biographical Information on the Speaker

Debra Humphreys is the vice president for communications and public affairs at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, a position she assumed in 2001. Prior to that she served as director of programs in the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Global Initiatives at AAC&U, where she directed programs on women’s issues and diversity in higher education. She also served as executive editor of AAC&U’s quarterly publication On Campus with Women and as editor of the quarterly Diversity Digest. She is currently leading national advocacy efforts as part of AAC&U’s campaign “Liberal Education and America’s Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College.” Through this effort she is helping to build communications capacity on the part of college and university leaders and faculty members and educate the public about the value of an engaged liberal education to prepare for the changing global economy. In addition, Humphreys worked extensively with the staff members coordinating AAC&U’s national initiative “Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College” and helped to edit and publicize its publication Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College.

Before assuming her current position at AAC&U, she served as project director of two of AAC&U’s national diversity initiatives, “Racial Legacies and Learning: An American Dialogue” and “Diversity Works.” Humphreys also served as associate director of AAC&U’s other national initiative, “American Commitment: Diversity, Democracy and Liberal Learning,” which involved more than 100 institutions working to transform their general education curricula to address issues of American diversity and democracy. She is the author of the project’s report General Education and American Commitments: A National Report on Diversity Courses and Requirements.

Before coming to AAC&U in 1992, she had experience teaching women’s studies and English at Rutgers University, Towson State University, and at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County. She also served as program associate at the National Women’s Studies Association. Humphreys speaks widely to educators, business leaders, and policymakers about the importance of liberal and higher education to the future of America’s economic health and democratic vitality. She also serves often as a communications and educational consultant to colleges and universities and serves on the editorial advisory board of University Business, Change magazine, and About Campus. She received her B.A. from Williams College and her Ph.D. in English from Rutgers University.