

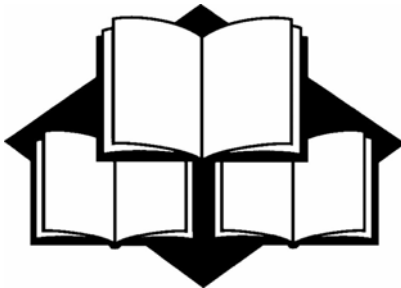


Standards and Criteria
for
“Liberal Arts
Certification”
of
Non-degree Granting
Programs

The American Academy for Liberal Education

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**STANDARDS AND CRITERIA
FOR
LIBERAL ARTS CERTIFICATION
OF
NON-DEGREE GRANTING PROGRAMS**



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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Readers of this handbook will note that the American Academy for Liberal Education differs from other accrediting agencies in significant ways. First, its scope is national, not regional. Second, the Academy's membership includes both institutions - universities and colleges - and programs within institutions of higher education. Most importantly, the Academy's focuses on a specific kind of education: liberal arts education.

Liberal learning - broad learning about the universe and nature and about humanity and human achievements - is needed now more than ever. While it is undoubtedly true that specialized knowledge and training will increase in importance as we move into the twenty-first century, highly specialized knowledge or technical expertise alone cannot provide an understanding of human powers, abilities, or aims, nor can it provide us with sound advice about the uses to which such specialized knowledge and technical expertise should be put. This is why reflective education about what is permanent and common to all, combined with rigorous preparation in the habits of learning, in the deepening of understanding, and in the skills of articulate expression, remains the central purpose of undergraduate education.

Certification of non-degree granting programs by the American Academy for Liberal Education signifies program integrity and a strong commitment to undergraduate education in the liberal arts. When the academy awards program accreditation, its recognition is focused on a general, liberal education program, to that program's function in fulfillment of the bachelor's degree, to that program's relation to the fulfillment of other baccalaureate degree requirements, as well as the administrative and teaching resource commitments upon which the general education program rests. *When the Academy awards certification*, the academy focuses upon programs only in their non-degree granting capacities. Therefore, certifiable programs may include a general education core curriculum which constitutes a part of the bachelor's degree, courses offered online in a programmatic menu intended to guide undergraduate students in fulfilling general, liberal education requirements for the bachelor's degree, or a program designed to organize course-taking toward liberal education ends (e.g., a college's or university's Honors program, an interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary program designed to organize electives or to fulfill a minor, or a humanities major, irrespective of its relationship to the institution's general education program.)

Membership based on certification attests to the fact that the program meets or exceeds, as appropriate, the Academy's independently established *Education Standards*. These standards require students to complete demanding studies in the arts and sciences taught by senior as well as junior faculty. Consequently, they provide interested parties - including parents and prospective students - a means of distinguishing between a college's programs with focused, well-articulated goals for liberal learning in areas such as history, mathematics, science, literature, languages and philosophy, and those with lower expectations that fail to reflect a coherent approach to liberal education.

The American Academy welcomes inquiries from institutions and programs that share its dedication to high standards of undergraduate teaching and learning.

Jeffrey D. Wallin
President

MISSION STATEMENT

The American Academy for Liberal Education is a national association for the accreditation of institutions and programs offering quality general education in the liberal arts that meet the Academy's administrative, fiscal, and education criteria. The Academy employs its specially designed *Education Standards* to evaluate an institution's academic requirements, practices and performance in the pursuit of excellence in liberal education. Universities, colleges, or baccalaureate degree programs within such institutions may apply for accreditation. Core curriculum programs in general education, College Honors programs, and menus of distance education programs designed to fulfill undergraduate general education requirements without themselves resulting in or granting an undergraduate degree may apply for "Liberal Arts Certification."

A distinguishing feature of the Academy's accreditation and certification process is its two-tier system for reviewing applicants' academic quality. The Academy's Council of Scholars is comprised of distinguished teachers and scholars committed to the purposes of liberal arts education. The Council independently reviews the academic requirements and practices of each applicant institution or program, and reports its findings to the Academy's Board of Trustees, which is comprised of prominent educators and other public figures. The Board, which is charged with responsibility for all accreditation and certification actions, then conducts its comprehensive review of applicants' educational, administrative, and fiscal performance. This system of dual review ensures that the educational performance of applicant institutions and programs receives the highest level of professional and independent appraisal.

The American Academy for Liberal Education is located in the nation's Capital and is non-profit, non-partisan, and non-sectarian. The Academy is listed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education as a recognized national accrediting agency for the accreditation and preaccreditation of institutions of higher education and programs within institutions of higher education that offer liberal arts degrees at the baccalaureate level. Its "Liberal Arts Certification" program was developed and offered beginning in 2003 through a three-year grant project funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), with reference specifically to distance education ("Learning Anytime Any Place" – LAAP) program.

The Academy's Education Standards

Forming liberally educated men and women has always been the leading aim of undergraduate programs in the liberal arts. For this reason the American Academy for Liberal Education believes that a program's demonstrated ability to instill and develop in its students the characteristics of liberally educate persons is the soundest basis for liberal arts accreditation. The Academy's *Education Standards* implement this principle in two distinct and complementary ways.

At the fore are the Academy's unique Liberal Learning Assessment standards. In the three criteria comprising Standard One, "Liberal Learning Assessment," the Academy asks programs to reflect upon and to describe and document their success in instilling and developing in their students the characteristics of liberally educated persons. These characteristics include an ability to reason clearly and effectively about important questions and issues, the acquisition of a rich fund of meaningful knowledge, and an inclination for seeking out and acquiring knowledge and skills. The Academy's Liberal Learning Assessment criteria are intended to open or extend a program-wide dialogue on aims for student learning as well as on means for determining whether those aims are being met. These criteria are carefully designed to be appropriate to the nature, goals, and means of liberal education and can accommodate the widest variety of curricular models and approaches.

The *Education Standards* are also crafted to ensure that the cornerstones of a liberal arts program focus clearly and coherently on providing students with a comprehensive liberal education. The several criteria outlined in Standard Two, "Educational Characteristics" of the *Education Standards* ask programs to describe their mission and educational aims, their conception and implementation of programs of study designed to fulfill those aims, their formation of a faculty well-qualified to carry out those programs of study, and their development of appropriate learning resources for those programs. These elements of an educational enterprise are the foundation and framework for student achievement in liberal learning.

The Academy's *Standards and Criteria for Liberal Arts Certification* are designed for use by programs offering unique "core curriculum" programs in general education, distance education (e-learning) courses or menus of courses in fulfillment of liberal arts general education requirements at the baccalaureate level, as well as for college or university Honors programs and other liberal education programs which do not themselves offer undergraduate degrees. AALE's "Liberal Arts Certification" is an award given to such programs, after thorough self-study and outside peer review, attesting to the academic excellence and rigor of such programs in fostering a liberal education. Programs preparing self-studies for certification should respond to each standard as well as to its associated criteria, always reflecting on the ways their mission, curriculum, teaching, learning resources, and learning assessment practices help to support and achieve the aim of forming liberally educated men and women.

Standard I: Liberal Learning Assessment

The formation of liberally educated men and women has always been the guiding purpose of undergraduate liberal arts institutions. For this reason the American Academy for Liberal Education views demonstrable success in forming liberally educated men and women as the true sign of excellence in undergraduate liberal arts education. The Academy believes that student learning in the elements of general education should be evaluated in verifiable and consistent ways. The assessment methods and instruments used should emphasize the quality of knowledge acquired as well as the development of the intellectual abilities and characteristics associated with liberal education.

AALE expects certified programs to develop and implement assessment plans for determining success in meeting their liberal arts mission and educational aims. AALE does not prescribe specific methods or instruments of assessment; rather, institutions are urged to develop and implement assessment plans appropriate to their mission and to the character and context of their educational program. AALE does expect that assessment will be both regular and comprehensive, and that members will use the results to improve teaching and learning. Faculty should have a central role in developing this process and evaluating results. Please refer to AALE's Policy on Learning Assessment for Liberal Arts Institutions found in Appendix A of this publication.

The Academy's unique *Liberal Learning Assessment Standards* first invite programs to reflect and report on the ways their educational programs actually foster the growth and flourishing of key characteristics, such as the ability to reason and communicate effectively, possession of a certain breadth and depth of knowledge, and a well-founded love of learning. These characteristics should be recognizable across a broad spectrum of approaches to liberal education.

The Academy's *Liberal Learning Assessment Standards* then require programs to report on their regular practices and processes for assessing the effectiveness of their liberal arts core courses and general education programs. To make well-rounded judgments concerning effectiveness, it is important to have access to a wide range of information. For this reason, liberal learning assessment programs should make use of multiple approaches and kinds of information; both qualitative and quantitative evaluations of student achievement should be considered, as appropriate.

Criterion One - Effective Reasoning

An education in the liberal arts always seeks to develop students' abilities to recognize and to think clearly about important issues and questions. The ability to reason effectively includes certain foundational skills or abilities (e.g., fluency in reading, writing, and oral communication, mastery of the basic principles of logical, mathematical, and scientific reasoning), as well as higher-order capacities for formulating, analyzing, integrating, and applying arguments and information.

Aspects of effective reasoning that programs should seek to assess through appropriate means may include:

- Demonstrated advancement toward the necessary foundational abilities of effective reasoning - e.g., fluency in reading, writing, and oral communication, and mastery of the basic principles of logical, mathematical, and scientific reasoning - at the conclusion of the general education, core curriculum, or honors program, or other certifiable programs.
- Student practices in framing reasonable arguments, supporting them with relevant evidence, and anticipating likely counter-arguments, along with the complementary practices in analyzing arguments rationally, evaluating the evidence supporting them, and framing reasonable and persuasive counter-arguments.
- Student practices in recognizing and evaluating new information, integrating that information into existing frameworks of knowledge, and adapting those frameworks as necessary or appropriate.
- Student practices in identifying and applying standards of intellectual rigor or precision appropriate to different kinds of subject matter.
- Student engagement in reasoned and sustained discussions of important issues or questions, as well as the student efforts to elucidate orally and in writing different or opposing perspectives evenhandedly and dispassionately.

Criterion Two - Broad and Deep Learning

A liberally educated person possesses a rich fund of meaningful knowledge, as well as the ability to compare and integrate new and diverse areas of knowledge in fruitful ways. A program certified by the Academy should move a student toward either a broad foundational knowledge of the various liberal arts and sciences or the depth of liberal learning that comes from a sustained, progressive inquiry into the areas of traditional liberal arts concerns. In most cases, students will also experience the depth of learning that comes from a sustained, progressive exploration of the distinct modes of inquiry belonging to one or more of the major disciplines. Through such studies or their equivalents, students acquire the ability to relate disparate areas of the arts and sciences to one another, as well as to integrate knowledge gained across different fields of study.

Aspects of breadth or depth in student learning that programs should seek to assess through appropriate means may include:

- A significant grasp of the basic knowledge, principles, and methods proper to the various subject areas or disciplines represented in the general education requirements.

- The ability to relate and integrate the knowledge, principles, and methods of study and analysis acquired in different subject areas or disciplines represented in the general education curriculum to one another in cogent and significant ways.
- A thoughtful grasp of the principles and history of democratic institutions and government generally, as well as of their practical workings.
- An understanding of the salient issues of Western history, politics and culture, together with a habit of bringing relevant knowledge of past thought and events to bear on contemporary questions. The ability to communicate effectively in an appropriate foreign or non-native language is a natural gateway to such studies.
- An understanding of the salient historical, political, and cultural issues of at least one non-Western (or in the case of students of non-Western origin, at least one non-native) culture, along with the ability to relate that history to the student's native culture in intellectually cogent and significant ways. The ability to communicate effectively in an appropriate foreign or non-native language is an ideal complement to such cross-cultural or comparative learning.
- An acquaintance with the methods and issues of scientific and technological knowledge and research, along with a basic understanding of the ethical, philosophical, and cultural implications of scientific and technological research and development. Where appropriate, this study may include a substantial experience with laboratory principles and methods.

Criterion Three - The Inclination to Inquire

An education in the liberal arts and sciences is more than the mere accumulation of knowledge and skills. It fosters and encourages the students' desire for seeking out and acquiring important knowledge and skills, both for their own sake and for the good they contribute to our common and individual lives. For this reason, a disposition for asking incisive and insightful questions and for pursuing enriching and useful skills is perhaps the surest sign of a liberally educated mind.

Aspects of students' inclination to inquire that programs should seek to assess through appropriate means may include:

- A reflective and inquisitive turn of mind, one that actively weighs the judgments and information put to it by authorities, by peer groups, by conventional wisdom, or by the habit of its own convictions.
- The ability to question and assess one's own knowledge, abilities, and performance accurately and without self-deception, along with the willingness and initiative to seek out and acquire relevant knowledge and training in areas of weakness.
- The ability to bring to bear the knowledge and skills acquired in academic pursuits to important issues, questions, and endeavors outside the academy and the disposition to seek out new knowledge and skills in and beyond the conventional or virtual classroom.

- A personally significant and continually examined perspective on historically and philosophically important answers to the question, "What is the good life?"
- A personally significant and continually examined perspective on historically and philosophically important answers to the questions, "What is the common good?" and "What is the best social order?"

Standard II. Educational Characteristics

The Academy understands undergraduate liberal arts programs (whether or not they are themselves degree-granting) to have three broad educational aims: introducing students to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake as well as for the good it brings to self and society, cultivating thoughtful and responsible persons and citizens, and preparing young men and women for the world of work. The Academy recognizes that liberal arts programs will seek to achieve these broad goals in a great variety of ways, providing their students with excellent yet distinctive educations.

It is important that liberal arts programs define clearly their special character, traditions, and educational objectives. It is equally important that these distinctive aims and characteristics are communicated accurately and effectively to students, parents, educators and administrators, and the general public.

The Academy's criteria in these areas invite programs to reflect and report on the nature of their mission and educational objectives, and on the ways they communicate these to the various communities they serve.

At most institutions of higher learning students receive a foundation in the diverse skills and subject areas of the arts and sciences through a program of general education. This broad foundation is usually complemented by a more focused exploration of the knowledge and methods of one disciplinary area or major.

The Academy's criteria for "Liberal Arts Certification" in these areas likewise invite non-degree granting programs to reflect and report on the ways their curricula acquaint students in rigorous and substantial ways with both the breadth and the depth of liberal learning. Variations from the particular academic norms described in these criteria are acceptable in cases where the demonstrated excellence of the general education, core curriculum, distance learning, or honors program as a whole assures substantial fulfillment of these standards.

Finally, in any conventional, site-based institution, the faculty is the body principally responsible for implementing the curriculum of a liberal arts program, as well as for ensuring that its educational objectives are met. Hence, for virtual programs (which may not retain "faculty" in the conventional sense), as well as other non-degree granting programs that seek "Liberal Arts Certification," the Academy believes that the primary activity of a liberal arts faculty or academic support staff is teaching and mentoring undergraduate students. This may be understood both in the special site-based sense of classroom instruction or, more broadly, as the guidance and mentoring essential to the formation of liberally educated persons. In addition to the faculty or academic staff, certain educational resources - the library or online access to other information sources foremost among them - are vital to any liberal arts program's ability to achieve its educational objectives.

Criterion One – Mission

- 1.1 The program’s mission statement reflects the importance and centrality of liberal education and states the program’s purposes and goals in a manner that corresponds to the way in which the curriculum is actually organized and taught. The program regularly reviews its mission statement or statement of purposes as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.
- 1.2 The program’s promotional and informational materials and activities are truthful, accurate, and current with regard to its educational mission and purposes. This statement is approved by the appropriate governance procedure, appropriately published and disseminated, and is understood by faculty, administrators, and students. The program’s mission statement or statement of purposes is made readily available to prospective applicants and to the general public.
- 1.3 The program has well-defined educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees and certificates it awards. These educational objectives are stated clearly, published and disseminated appropriately, and govern expectations for student achievement. The program regularly reviews its educational objectives as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.
- 1.4 The program agrees to inform the Academy in a timely manner of any substantive changes to its mission, organization, or educational objectives. Please consult the AALE Policies and Procedures Manual for a complete definition of substantive change.

Criterion Two – Freedom of Thought and Speech

- 2.1 Liberty of thought and freedom of speech are a means and end of liberal education. Consistent with an institutional policy which supports liberty of thought and speech, the program's education and function support liberty of thought and speech, bound only by such rules of civility and order as to facilitate intellectual inquiry and the search for truth.
- 2.2 Any limitations on freedom of speech related to a program’s affirmation of particular religious principles or beliefs must be clearly specified, published, and appropriately disseminated. **It is especially important that such limitations be clearly described in a program’s recruitment and informational materials for students, faculty, and administrative personnel.**

Criterion Three – Entrance Requirements

- 3.1 Where appropriate to upper-level liberal arts programs, the program regularly reviews its admissions requirements and requirements for students continuing their enrollment as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.
- 3.2 The parent institution's catalogs, student handbooks, other publications and publicly accessible electronic media clearly and accurately describe, as appropriate, the program's:
 - a. Admissions requirements;
 - b. Academic requirements and responsibilities for enrolled students;
 - c. Policies regarding academic dismissal, suspension, probation, and readmission;
 - d. Policies regarding the collection and retention of student academic records; and
 - e. Procedures for lodging appeals or complaints.

This information is made readily available to faculty, prospective students, and students enrolled in the program.

- 3.3 The program ensures that information concerning admissions requirements and requirements for enrolled students is truthfully and accurately communicated by the program's admissions staff and representatives as well as through its published promotional and informational materials.
- 3.4 The program maintains current information concerning rates of enrollment, retention, and completion. The program makes such information readily available to prospective and enrolled students, as well as to its parent institution and the academy, upon request.

Criterion Four – General Education (where applicable)

- 4.1 The general education requirement ensures a basic knowledge of the liberal arts including, as appropriate, mathematics and the physical and biological sciences, (including laboratory experience), intermediate knowledge of at least one foreign language, the study of literature and literary classics, the political, philosophical and cultural history of Western civilization, and the foundations and principles of American society. Where the applicant program for certification is coordinated with an overall curriculum leading toward a bachelor's degree, the overall undergraduate degree requirements in the liberal arts and sciences call for not less than a third of the student's course work to be taken within the general education requirement, except when equivalent attainment is proven by examination.

Variations from this norm are allowable in cases where the outstanding character of other elements of the program assures substantial compliance with the learning objectives inherent in these general education criteria.

- 4.2 The program has a regular process for general education curriculum formation and review. The roles of the faculty, administration, and governing board in this process are clearly defined. Curricular offerings and programs not requiring governing board approval are subject to appropriate governance procedures.
- 4.3 The program has well-defined policies concerning the transfer of general education credit to and from other institutions. These policies ensure that incoming transfer students fulfill the requirements or reasonable equivalents, or that students seeking to retain and transfer credits earned from the certified program to other institutions and programs are given reasonable expectations of doing so. These policies are communicated clearly and accurately by the program's admissions staff and representatives, as well as in its published informational material.

Criterion Five – Learning Assessment Practices

- 5.1 Student learning is appropriately evaluated, either by means of a general examination or some academic equivalent. The program regularly reviews its methods, instruments and procedures for assessment as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.
- 5.2 The program's faculty determine the number of courses or credit hours required for satisfactory progress toward a degree, or for continuing enrollment status. These include establishing minimum grade point averages or results of externally-refereed examination scores, along with appropriate methods, instruments and procedures for assessing student learning and allowable time frames for completion of program or degree requirements, as appropriate.
- 5.3 The institution (or program) conducts regular and on-going assessment of the effectiveness of the program, in light of its liberal arts mission and educational objectives. Assessment processes are clearly defined, comprehensive and integrated into the overall planning and evaluation strategy. These assessment processes are consistent with the AALE Policy on Learning Assessment for Liberal Arts Institutions or Programs.
- 5.4 The institution or program identifies and publishes learning aims for its certifiable programs. Through regular assessment, the institution or program demonstrates that students who complete these programs have fulfilled these aims.

- 5.5 The institution or program provides evidence that its assessment activities are used to improve teaching and learning effectiveness.

Criterion Six -- Curriculum Structure

- 6.1 The program's or curriculum's prerequisite structure, as defined and enforced, ensures an orderly progression from elementary to advanced levels of knowledge, and the course definitions in the program catalogue or equivalent publications distinguish clearly among those considered fundamental and those that belong to advanced subjects or disciplines. The program's faculty and/or academic staff and administration jointly determine criteria for satisfactory continuance and progress in the program, number of courses or credit hours to be completed each year, minimum acceptable grade point averages or externally-reviewed examination scores, other appropriate means of assessing student learning, and allowable time frames for completing the program, as appropriate.
- 6.2 The program regularly reviews its requirements in the light of its mission, educational objectives, and commonly accepted academic norms. The roles of the faculty, administration, and governing board in this process are clearly defined. Activities and programs not requiring governing board approval are subject to appropriate governance procedures.
- 6.3 For each major there is at least one full-time, competent faculty member responsible for oversight and coordination.
- 6.4 The program's promotional and informational materials and activities are clear, accurate, and current with regard to its curriculum content and structure and requirements. This information is published and made readily available to prospective and enrolled students and is communicated clearly and accurately by the program's admissions staff and representatives, as well as by its academic advisors.

Criterion Seven – Qualified Faculty, Instructors, and Academic Support Staff

- 7.1 The program employs faculty, instructors, and/or academic support staff who are qualified to carry out its educational purposes and programs, including assessment. Programs not providing direct instruction employ faculty or academic staff qualified to develop, evaluate and administer courses, curricula, programs, and the appropriate assessment of these.
- 7.2 Where applicable, the program employs faculty or academic staff who are properly qualified to teach the courses to which they are assigned, and who

demonstrate effective teaching The program employs regular procedures for monitoring teaching effectiveness.

- 7.3 The program observes regular procedures for recruitment, appointment, evaluation, and promotion of its faculty or academic staff. These procedures are published and appropriately disseminated. The program maintains appropriate documentation of academic credentials for all faculty and academic staff.

Criterion Eight – Class or Virtual Cohort Size

- 8.1 Where applicable, class or cohort size is appropriate to subject matter, level of instruction, and need for interaction. The program regularly reviews its class or cohort size policies as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.

Criterion Nine – Academic Advisement

- 9.1 The program’s academic advisement and support services and policies are appropriate to its mission and educational objectives, and fully support the goals of liberal learning. The program regularly reviews and assesses its academic advisement and support services and policies to ensure that every enrolled student receives a level of contact and academic support commensurate with what might be required for a student at a conventional, site based institution, or in any case sufficient to ensure a reasonable prospect of successful completion of the academic program.

Criterion Ten – Library or Information Resources

- 10.1 Access to conventional library or online information resources is adequate to the demands of the program. The program regularly assesses the adequacy of its library and/or other informational resources as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance, and the academic performance of its students.

Criterion Eleven – Technical Support Services

- 11.1 Technical support services are adequate to the demands of the program. The program regularly assesses the adequacy of its technical support services as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.

Appendix A

AALE Policy on Learning Assessment for Liberal Arts Programs

AALE expects members to develop and implement assessment plans for determining success in meeting their liberal arts mission and educational aims. AALE does not prescribe specific methods or instruments of assessment; rather, institutions are urged to develop assessment plans appropriate to their mission and to the character and context of their educational program. AALE does expect that assessment will be both regular and comprehensive, and that members will use the results to improve teaching and learning. Faculty should have a central role in developing this process and evaluating results.

To make well-rounded judgments concerning the effectiveness of educational programs, it is important to have access to a wide range of information. For this reason, assessment plans should make use of multiple approaches and kinds of information; both qualitative and quantitative evaluations of student achievement should be considered, as appropriate. The following list of approaches and data is intended to be illustrative and exemplary and not prescriptive or exhaustive:

- Systematic evaluation of student examinations, theses or portfolios;
- Records of oral examinations and interviews with students by faculty;
- Electronic recordings of performances, compositions, artistic creations and audible demonstrations of liberal learning;
- Websites of current students', faculty, and program activities and resources;
- Electronic blackboard samples of electronic conversations among students and faculty;
- Results of surveys addressing the undergraduate learning environment, e.g. the National Survey of Student Engagement;
- Results of standardized examinations for graduate or professional school admissions;
- Retention and degree-completion rates;
- Rates of employment and/or other relevant occupational data;
- Matriculation rates for graduate or professional study;
- Results of applicable licensing examinations;
- Studies of alumni achievement and satisfaction;
- Trends in data reported through AALE's Graduate Achievement Data Form.