

# Higher Education's Compact with America: Shared Principles... | AAC&U

*The following statement, issued jointly by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Phi Beta Kappa Society, was developed in collaboration with college and university presidents and other educational leaders across the country, after national meetings convened by AAC&U and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.*

Higher education is one of America's greatest public trusts—a partnership between institutions, learners, and society built on the belief that education empowers people and strengthens communities. Colleges and universities exist not only to provide knowledge and skills, but to expand opportunity, advance discovery, and uphold the values that sustain our democracy and secure our shared prosperity.

The foundation of American higher education is service to the public good through teaching students, expanding knowledge, and providing essential sources of expertise to society. Colleges and universities serve both their surrounding communities and the broader society, partnering to solve problems, strengthen economies, and enrich cultural life. Teaching, inquiry, research, and scholarship in keeping with these purposes deserve and require public support and investment.

In fulfilling this public trust, higher education embraces a set of enduring principles and makes corresponding promises to students, communities, and the nation. These commitments form the basis of the compact between higher education and the nation that has served America so well for generations.

## **1. Opportunity**

Opportunity is the promise that higher education makes to every learner—that talent, not circumstance, will determine how far one can go.

We affirm that true opportunity means more than access; it means belonging, fairness, and the unwavering support to reach completion and success. It calls on us to remove barriers, close achievement gaps, and welcome back those who began but have not yet finished their educational journeys. To uphold opportunity is to ensure that every student, regardless of background or pathway, is empowered to learn, persist, and thrive—not only in college, but throughout life.

## **2. Affordability**

Affordability is the promise that the cost of college will never stand between talent and opportunity.

We affirm that higher education must remain within reach for all who seek it—through responsible stewardship, public investment, and institutional innovation that reduce barriers and debt. Colleges and universities share a duty to ensure that price reflects true value, that aid reaches those who need it most, and that students can pursue learning without mortgaging their futures. By keeping higher education accessible and sustainable, we preserve it as a public good—one that empowers individuals, strengthens communities, and secures the nation's long-term prosperity.

## **3. Excellence**

Excellence is the standard by which higher education fulfills its public trust—a commitment to quality, rigor, and integrity in all we do.

We affirm that excellence arises from a community devoted to inquiry, evidence, and continual improvement. It is sustained through accountability—through assessment, accreditation, and the transparent pursuit of better outcomes for students and society. Excellence is advanced by faculty who embody intellectual leadership and uphold the traditions of peer review, shared governance, and critical and open inquiry. It is protected by academic freedom—the right of faculty and institutions to pursue knowledge, research, and teaching without undue interference, and the responsibility to uphold scholarly and professional standards in doing so. In honoring these principles, we preserve the integrity, vitality, and credibility of American higher education itself.

#### **4. Freedom**

Freedom is the promise and foundation of higher learning—the principle that nurtures independent thought, open exchange, and democratic citizenship.

We affirm that freedom is both the means and the end of learning—the capacity to ask hard questions, to test ideas, and to speak and listen across differences with respect and reason. Freedom encompasses the open inquiry and expression that sustain discovery; the institutional autonomy of colleges and universities to decide, on academic grounds, whom to admit, what is taught, how, and by whom; and the civic habits that enable democracy and culture to flourish. By upholding these freedoms, colleges and universities prepare students not only to think critically but to engage constructively, ensuring that education remains a force for truth, understanding, and the continual renewal of a free society.

#### **5. Security**

Security is the promise that higher education prepares individuals and societies to face uncertainty with confidence, adaptability, and purpose.

We affirm that college provides not only the means to build a stable and fulfilling life, but also the tools to navigate a changing world and exercise agency over one's own future. Through teaching, research, and global engagement, higher education strengthens both personal resilience and collective safety—developing the talent that sustains economic and national security, welcoming international students who carry forward shared values, and advancing discoveries that protect and improve lives. In doing so, our institutions uphold security as both a personal assurance and a public good.

#### **6. Partnership**

Partnership is the promise that higher education advances knowledge and innovation through collaboration in service to the public good.

We affirm that colleges and universities thrive when they work alongside government, industry, and communities to tackle the world's most urgent challenges—from curing disease and protecting the environment to strengthening democracy and enriching cultural life, to improving daily life through discovery and invention. These partnerships turn research into real-world impact, driving progress that saves lives, creates opportunity, and builds shared prosperity. By linking curiosity with commitment, higher education serves as both a partner and a catalyst in shaping a better future for all.

## 7. Prosperity

Prosperity is the promise that higher education enables individuals and communities to thrive—in wealth, health, and well-being.

We affirm that colleges and universities are engines of shared prosperity, anchoring local communities through service, employment, and civic investment, and powering state and national economies through innovation and talent. As major employers and centers of research, they sustain the public infrastructure that supports everyday life—from K–12 schools to public safety and community spaces. Each year, higher education prepares millions of graduates who fuel the workforce, strengthen communities, and expand opportunity. In advancing human potential and economic vitality together, our institutions promote prosperity as both a personal achievement and a public trust.

## Endorsements

*The statement above has been endorsed by the following:*

- Jonathan Alger, President, American University
- Ian Baucom, President, Middlebury College
- Kevin W. Beardmore, President, Southeast New Mexico College
- Lance Bennett, President and Founder, The People's Institute for the Common Good
- Allen Berger, Former President, Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges
- Richard A. Bierschbach, Interim President, Wayne State University
- James Birge, President, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
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- Jennifer Chrisler, President, Hampshire College
- Fiona H. Chrystall, President, Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education
- Christina A. Clark, President, La Roche University
- Matthew Cohen, Managing Director, Cohen Strategy Group, LLC
- Marc C. Conner, President, Skidmore College
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- Jim Dlugos, President, Landmark College
- Harry Dumay, President, Elms College
- Jonathan Eldridge, President, College of Marin
- Thomas P. Foley, President, Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania
- Uttam Gaulee, President, STAR Scholars Network
- Michael Gavin, President, Delta College
- Mary Grant, President, Massachusetts College of Art and Design
- Jonathan D. Green, President, Susquehanna University
- Jeremy Haefner, President, University of Denver
- David Harker, Executive Director, Partners for Campus Community Engagement
- Wolde-Ab Isaac, Chancellor, Riverside Community College District

- Lisa Jasinski, President, Associated Colleges of the Midwest
- Suzanne M. Johnson, President, Green River College
- Cristle Collins Judd, President, Sarah Lawrence College
- Richard P. Keeling, Chairman and Senior Executive Consultant, Keeling & Associates, LLC
- Joseph W. King, Former President, Lyon College
- John C. Knapp, Past President, Washington & Jefferson College
- James Lentini, President, Molloy University
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- Kellye Y. Testy, CEO and Executive Director, Association of American Law Schools
- Laura Walker, President, Bennington College
- Michael Whelan, President, Wheaton College (MA)
- Julie White, Chancellor and CEO, Pierce College District
- Elisabeth Zinser, Retired President, Southern Oregon University

*If you would like to endorse this statement on behalf of your institution or organization, please contact David Tritelli at [tritelli@aacu.org](mailto:tritelli@aacu.org).*



RADFORD UNIVERSITY

October 30, 2025

Dear President Danilowicz --

Those who were able to be present at the Academic Freedom forum were pleased to hear you say that the University "must" defend academic freedom. That pledge, however, is only meaningful to the extent that the entire campus community hears it – the climate of fear about free expression on campus (and around the country) is high, and the community needs to hear your reassurance. As a step toward this reassurance, RU-AAUP calls on you to add your name to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) statement released on October 17, 2025, and copied below. This statement has already been signed by presidents of at least three dozen universities and colleges, with more signing each week. As we wrote in our previous letter of October 9, 2025, this public affirmation is necessary to reassure the RU community that partisan attacks from outside groups will not endanger our academic freedom or standing at Radford. This is a safe action as well, as you will be joining with other university presidents, and the AAC&U, of which Radford is a member. Signing this statement is a positive next step toward creating an atmosphere of inquiry free from fear, as our core values state.

With Highlander Pride,

Radford University AAUP

CC: Faculty Senate Faculty Issues committee chair Kevin Farrell, Ph.D.  
Faculty Senate President Matt Close, Ph.D.

Contact:

RU-AAUP chapter president, Brock Cutler, Ph.D.

[radford.aaup@gmail.com](mailto:radford.aaup@gmail.com)

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Statement located at:

<https://www.aacu.org/newsroom/higher-educations-compact-with-america-shared-principles-for-the-common-good>