Integrative learning is the new frontier for twenty-first-century liberal education, and it is the focal point for AAC&U’s work on the renewal of liberal learning as well as for Project Kaleidoscope’s rapidly expanding work on twenty-first-century designs for student achievement in science. The articles in this issue of Liberal Education emerge from these important efforts to develop a more purposeful and connective framework for college learning, a framework that emphasizes cross-disciplinary inquiry, big-picture thinking, and integrative applied work—from first to final year.

The vision that guides AAC&U in its commitment to integrative learning is summed up in the LEAP report, College Learning for the New Global Century, which calls for students to achieve, across general education and major fields, “wide-ranging knowledge of science, cultures, and society; high-level intellectual and practical skills; an active commitment to personal and social responsibility; and the demonstrated ability to apply learning to complex problems and challenges.” Integration and application are woven together in this vision, in the conviction that students must connect many strands of learning from different sources in order to tackle—whether through research or hands-on projects—the kinds of complex, unscripted questions they will face in work, civil society, and life.

But if this is to be the goal, proponents will need to face head-on the huge barriers blocking the way—the formidable elephants already in the room. One of these, of course, is the economic meltdown that has led to rash efforts to stuff increasing numbers of students into each course and has made hands-on and integrative learning less likely. A second, closely related elephant in the room is the enormous amount of federal and philanthropic energy now being invested in what can best be described as an efficiency plan for the Cold War curriculum. The Cold War curriculum? That, dear colleagues, is the third elephant in the room, a beast so familiar to all of us that many of us scarcely notice it at all.

Assumed rather than described in virtually all policy and philanthropic plans for systemic changes intended to increase graduation rates, the Cold War curriculum is not now and never has been a design for integrative learning across the curriculum. Both in its original twentieth-century architecture and in the new twenty-first-century plans for making it work more efficiently, this assumed curriculum will continue to impede rather than foster the kind of big-picture, integrative, hands-on learning that thoughtful educators value and employers warmly endorse (see employer research at www.aacu.org/leap).

The Cold War curriculum—invented in the first decades of the twentieth century, but consolidated and expanded after World War II—is the design for learning that is captured in the convenient shorthand of “breadth and depth.” Taken together, breadth and depth provide organizing principles for the content of the curriculum,
but not for students’ ability to put knowledge to use. With admirable concision, “breadth and depth” signals the general idea that broad general education courses come first, followed later by concentrated study in a particular field or “major.”

In this now-standard model, breadth—to be attained in the first two years of college—is the glue that connects the so-called transfer curriculum in community colleges with the work of the four-year institutions. Depth, which is supposed to come later, is seen as the centerpiece of the advanced curriculum. With general education to be “gotten out of the way as soon as possible,” as students everywhere are still advised today, there is no intention of and certainly no game plan for helping students make their general studies serve as a context for their major studies. The entire design fosters specialization rather than integration, and critics have complained vehemently about exactly that design flaw ever since “breadth” began to gain steam.

This twentieth-century curriculum did not lack for high-minded exposition. The Harvard Redbook, in particular, shows what thoughtful people hoped it might achieve. But as “distribution requirements” across a range of general fields became the standard practice, concepts devolved into checklists. As a result, students everywhere are candidly mystified as to why they have to take so many courses in which they are not interested.

Critiqued by students, decried by thoughtful faculty and other academic leaders, and being redesigned by AAC&U member institutions across the country, this tattered old distribution system is currently receiving not a decent burial, but an efficiency overhaul led simultaneously by the federal government, state legislators, and some parts of the philanthropic community.

Beyond breadth and depth, consider the following systemic components of this fragmented industrial-age system: the notion that each course is a self-contained entity; the assignment of standardized credit hours for each of these self-contained courses; the development of “transfer packages”—organized by breadth or distribution categories (sciences, humanities, social sciences, the arts, writing, and math)—not to exceed a certain number of credits, which, if attained by the student, in fact facilitate transfer and, once complemented by the major and electives, are the basis—the primary basis, assuming decent grades—for the degree.

Today, each of these outmoded components is getting a design overhaul, with the express goals of ensuring quality and facilitating students’ passage through the (fragmented) system. Very soon, there will be a federal standard not (as many had feared) for students’ expected level of competence on core intellectual skills, but rather, a century too late, for the meaning of the credit hour! Similarly, many states and state systems are tidying up the transfer package not to ensure that students’ have achieved integrative learning at least within the zone of general education, but rather to make sure that courses carrying the same label and the same number will be more readily accepted wherever students may go. And the courses themselves? Work is underway to redesign “big gateway courses”—invariably general education courses—to make them more supportive of student completion and “success.” This is not a bad thing in itself, of course, but it does nothing to tackle the fragmentation and dis-integration that is the most chronic problem of the introductory college curriculum.

I watch all of this and shake my head that we have failed so utterly to engage policy makers and philanthropy with the really fine work now progressing on campuses that are seeking to break free of the Cold War curriculum and to create new designs for learning—designs that far more successfully prepare students for a world in which the ability to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge will be perhaps the only key to a sustainable, humanitarian future. The designs are out there. But with few exceptions, neither policy makers nor philanthropic leaders know anything about them. They are doing nothing at all to support the better designs that are already in place on many campuses. Instead, they are trying to...
fix the old design.

Distribution requirements organized around concepts of breadth and a major totally disconnected from broader studies have been, from the day they were invented, impediments to integrative learning across the curriculum. They will remain impediments once the current overhaul of the Cold War curriculum is complete. Tidying up the credit hour, fixing individual courses, and reifying transfer packages composed of disconnected courses may perhaps do something to facilitate students’ ease of passage across a complex educational system. But these reforms will not foster the learning outcomes students actually need for a fast-paced, chaotic, and fragmented world.