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The Democracy Commitment Declaration

A healthy democracy depends on engaged citizens, proud of their rights, thoughtful about their responsibilities, and informed about their choices. Thomas Jefferson put it simply: "An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic. Self-government is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight."

The condition of the republic today is marked by a national politics driven by bitter partisanship. Our discourse is marked by an unwillingness to listen to one another. Our elected leaders seldom move past sound bites to engage in collaborative solutions to the nation's growing list of problems. Widening divisions between Americans because of race, economic circumstance and geography make political solutions seem increasingly difficult.

At the same time, many of our citizens lack basic knowledge of the civic and democratic institutions through which democratic power is exercised. Too few vote, too many are alienated from a process they believe irrelevant, too many are doubtful about their ability to change the circumstances of their lives.

This alienation from politics and from the democratic process is dangerous for the nation. A people who are cynical about democracy are too easily prey to manipulation; a nation that does not engage its citizens in civic work loses the imagination and capacity of those citizens.

American higher education has a long history of service to democracy. Our nation's colleges and universities have always had a mission to make education available to the many, not only to the few, and to ensure that the benefits and obligations of education were a democratic opportunity.

This is a proud history, but it is not enough.

Beyond access to education itself, colleges and universities have an obligation to educate about democracy, to engage students in both an understanding of civic institutions and the practical experience of acting in the public arena.

The American community colleges share this mission of educating about democracy, not least because we are the gateway to higher education for millions who might not otherwise get a postsecondary education. More critically, we are rooted deeply in local communities that need the civic leadership and practical democratic capacity of our students for their political and social health.

Community college students come from all walks of life and all social stations. Our students represent all ethnicities and religious communities. Our learners are all ages. Their ability to exercise their democratic rights and work together in public life, to be generous and tolerant and yet able to advocate for themselves, will help to determine the future of our communities.

America's community colleges are much in the news these days. We enroll nearly half of all students in American higher education. We prepare students for transfer to university, for entry into the job market, and for lives of continual learning. We provide critical services in basic skills, literacy and developmental education. We are an integral part of the economic and social development of our local communities, and serve rural, urban and suburban regions across the nation.

The demands of economic recovery have brought increased attention to America's community colleges, as our colleges play a critical role in preparing men and women for entry into the job market, and in providing education and skill development for workers laid off during the recession. Community colleges have a well-deserved reputation for programs that lead to immediate employment, and for being responsive to changes in local and regional job markets.

At the same time, community colleges provide low-cost and accessible two-year programs in the liberal arts and sciences, and a significant percentage of our students transfer to America's four-year colleges and universities. Indeed, more than half of all Americans who receive bachelor's degrees from state colleges and universities have transferred from community colleges.

The American community colleges do more, however, than educate for the job market or for transfer to university. We have a critical role to play in preparing our students for their roles as citizens and engaged members of their communities.

In service to democracy and the future of our communities, we announce a new national initiative: The Democracy Commitment.

The Democracy Commitment will provide a national platform for the development and expansion of programs and projects aiming at engaging community college students in civic learning and democratic practice. Our goal is that every graduate of an American community college shall have had an education in democracy. This includes all our students, whether they aim to transfer to university, earn an associate degree, or obtain a certificate.

The Democracy Commitment asks of participating community colleges the following:

- A public commitment to the central role of civic education
- Intentional support for both curricular and extracurricular programs that build civic skills among students, especially focusing on projects that support students in doing public work
- Faculty and staff development in civic engagement
- Partnerships with local civic, non-profit and governmental agencies whose primary work is the social and economic development of local communities
- Participation in a national clearinghouse of program designs, curricula and project development strategies for community colleges
- Participation in an annual meeting that brings together faculty, staff, administrators and partners
- Development of joint regional and national programs with partner universities, and with national higher education associations

America's community colleges have enormous talent and capacity, with faculty and staff committed to the success of our students, and with students bright with ambition and passion. All of us share a commitment to a democratic nation. Now is the time to fulfill that commitment.

We, presidents and chancellors of community colleges and community college districts across the nation, are proud to affix our signatures as founding members of The Democracy Commitment on this day, Friday, the fourth of November 2011, in New York City.

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