

*Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation: Community, Difference, and Democratic Thinking*

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*“American higher education in general should prepare students for lives of critical inquiry, active civic participation and leadership as socially responsible members of their diverse communities, locally, nationally, and globally. This learning outcome is surely not solely achieved at American universities. In fact, it might be better achieved by community college students who have lived the structural inequality and refuse to have it masked any further.”*

– Robert W. Franco,  
“The Civic Role of Community Colleges: Preparing Students for the Work of Democracy”

## **Difference, Community, and Democratic Thinking: Reaffirming the Public Purpose of the Humanities at Community Colleges**

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in partnership with The Democracy Commitment (TDC), a new national initiative of community college presidents designed to deeply and intentionally engage community college students in civic learning and democratic practice, are pleased to be submitting a proposal to the NEH initiative, *Bridging Cultures at Community Colleges*. Below, we sketch out the parameters for the project as it is so far conceived, and we welcome feedback from our NEH colleagues.

### **What Is the Focus?**

The project’s conceptualization grows out of a series of “shaping” conversations. In addition to key discussions with Dr. Brian Murphy, president of DeAnza College, and one of the principals behind TDC and Dr. Elizabeth Minnich, professor of philosophy, former head of the North Carolina Humanities Council, and senior fellow at AAC&U, we spoke with several community college faculty in the humanities; and community college leaders in civic engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Confronted by a global age characterized by clashing differences and ever more polarized camps, our Bridging Cultures project turns to democratic concepts and humanities perspectives to find ways to bridge divides and unite people in a common

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<sup>1</sup> With deep thanks to others who also influenced our thinking thus far: Sean Brumfield, executive director, Atlanta Center for Civic Engagement, former chair, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, and instructor, English and Humanities, Georgia Perimeter College; Elizabeth Clark, professor of English, LaGuardia Community College/City University of New York; Robert W. Franco, director, Office for Institutional Effectiveness and professor, anthropology, Kapi'olani Community College; Alberto Olivas, director of Center for Civic Participation, Maricopa County Community College District; Paul Petrequin, residential faculty in history, Chandler-Gilbert Community College; Gail Robinson, program director for service learning, American Association of Community Colleges; Bernie Ronan, associate vice chancellor, Maricopa County Community College District; and Mary Elizabeth Tyler, service learning coordinator, Atlanta Center for Civic Engagement, Georgia Perimeter College.

purpose. Rooted as the project is in the power of a college curriculum, the project uses as its organizing concept the notion of thinking democratically in order to explore how communities can be strengthened rather than fractured by attending to differences. As Stephen Bloch-Schulman, explains it, democratic thinking is “a form of thinking that is ‘neither coerced nor coercive,’ one that helps us to be ‘more likely to question than assert, inclined to listen to many sides, capable of making sensitive distinctions that hold differences in play rather than dividing in order to exclude, and desirous of persuading others rather than reducing them to silence by refuting them.’... a course that is teaching for democratic thinking would ask not only *how* to do x but also *why* to do x, when to do x, and when not to” (Bloch-Schulman, 2010, pp. 407-408).

The intellectual heart of the project is an intensive program of curriculum and faculty development where, in conjunction with key humanities scholars and consultants, participating community college humanities faculty will:

- explore the relationship between multicultural humanities texts and intellectual traditions in core democratic writings to illuminate themes of freedom and responsibility, equality and difference, recognition and marginalization, and individual dignity and social cohesion.
- investigate how these humanities texts and traditions can refresh core democratic concepts *and* how core democratic concepts can refresh understandings and teaching of humanities topics and texts.
- construct or adapt courses and course sequences to explore these issues in the context of community college students who are themselves diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, socio-economic level, nationality, country of origin, and citizenship status.
- devise pedagogies that promise to engage students in “democratic thinking,” that is, a form of *thinking well, together* about course-specific issues of significance related to difference and community, locally and globally.<sup>2</sup>
- conceive of innovative ways to create participatory spaces where students practice responsible engagement with diverse others—from classmates to literary and historical figures to members of the larger community.

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<sup>2</sup> Bloch-Schulman also describes several hallmarks of teaching for democratic thinking, such as teaching orthodox and heterodox views together as a way for students to “consider options with real differences,” and teaching a “discipline historically, rather than viewing the subject anachronistically,” as a way to help students to face their own “historical situatedness” (p. 408).

- create and share new or revised course descriptions, pedagogical tools, reading lists, assignments, and assessments keyed to project and course learning goals

### **Why This Focus?**

AAC&U and The Democracy Commitment are envisioning this project as a response to multiple contextual factors:

- The unique position of community colleges to extend democratic learning, intercultural dialogue, and understandings of democratic citizenship to millions of students as they prepare to transfer to university, enter the job market, or otherwise engage in lives of continual learning and purpose.
- The focus on community colleges as sites of industry retraining, which risks marginalizing both the humanities as disciplines and the historic public purpose of American postsecondary education in preparing students for thoughtful engagement in the public sphere. With many describing this narrowed focus as “the new normal,” such marginalization promises to become permanent if steps are not taken to counter this trend.
- The 21<sup>st</sup> century recognition of the interconnectedness of the United States with regions, communities, and cultures around the globe, brought ever closer by technology but not necessarily accompanied by increased understanding of the dramatic differences or common bonds that can exist within and across groups.
- The recognition that “global” can describe many municipalities and regions of the United States, given dramatic shifts in demographic diversity sparked in part by new emigration and immigration patterns that reflect complex “push” and “pull” factors. Many of today’s community college student populations reflect this global-local confluence.
- The ongoing need to fulfill the democratic promise of the United States for all of its citizens, including the promise of a humanities-rich, horizon-expanding education for students from all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups.
- The particular role that the humanities can play in helping students, as ordinary citizens, to think through and navigate the complexities of the public sphere, including seemingly unbridgeable cultural divides. This is accomplished through critical exploration of historical antecedents, artistic and literary works, and philosophical and religious frameworks grounded in meaningful reflection and activated by the company of diverse peers.

- The evidence that well-designed curricula that reflect the diversity of today's students and engage them in "big questions" about issues of social significance (including issues of significance for local communities where many community colleges are drawn from) can engender greater student engagement and success.
- Finally, the recognition of numerous signs in the larger culture of incivility, alienation from democratic processes, and ill-informed engagement that is often unaccompanied by sharp thinking, historical or contextual understanding, or an ability to discern nuances and complexities in oneself and others.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why This Partnership?**

AAC&U is partnering with The Democracy Commitment because of the complementary assets each entity can bring to the project. Nearing its centennial, AAC&U with its 1,250 institutional members from across all sectors brings a long-standing commitment to liberal education as the distinguishing hallmark of U.S. higher education and proven national leadership on curriculum reform designed to prepare all students to engage responsibly in our diverse, yet stratified, democracy. The Association also brings significant expertise in running successful, multi-campus national projects and in multiplying a project's impact well beyond the participating institutions.

The Democracy Commitment, an expanding network of community college presidents, is leading the way for this sector to reclaim its historic democratic educational purpose. TDC offers several key assets: concrete examples of institutional-level support for the kinds of teaching and learning that NEH is seeking through *Bridging Cultures*; presidents with significant "bully pulpits" to champion the critical role of the humanities in helping students think through and navigate the complexities of the public sphere, including seemingly unbridgeable cultural divides; and representation of the diversity of community colleges and the students who attend them.

### **What Is the Project Structure?**

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<sup>3</sup> As our colleagues in The Democracy Commitment note, "our national discourse is marked by an unwillingness to listen to one another. Our political leaders seldom move past sound bites to engage in collaborative solutions to the nation's growing list of problems...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 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 misses out on their imagination and capacity."

We envision three levels of work in this project:

- ***Centralized faculty and curriculum development.*** This work will involve campus leadership teams of humanities faculty plus one senior administrator to help ensure institutional-level engagement and support for the curricular changes that are produced in the project. The lead event within this centralized work will be an intensive, five-day summer institute, accompanied by a series of events (both in person and virtual) leading up to and following the institute, which will focus on the ongoing growth and development of the participants and their projects.
- ***On-campus faculty work.*** In between the centralized events, leadership teams will work on their own campuses to construct or adapt courses, create new assignments and assessments, develop course materials, and so on. The senior administrator and others on the leadership teams will also work to ensure that two-way communication is established between the project teams and other critical individuals and groups on and off campus.
- ***Leadership within a hub of partner community colleges.*** As will be specified in the call for participation, the selected community colleges will serve as a leadership “hub” for an affinity group of community colleges, engaging humanities faculty colleagues in professional development activities and sharing information and resources developed as part of the project. These affinity groups might be based on region, district, or interest area (e.g., a group of community colleges that are all working with e-Portfolio technology).

Through a national call for participation, we will seek community colleges that have visible institutional support for this work (e.g., includes diversity/intercultural, global, and/or civic learning in the institutional mission statement, strategic plan, etc.) and the ability to commit in-kind resources (funds, release time, etc.) to all three levels of work. We envision the project beginning in February 2012 and lasting 36 months, with the summer institute taking place in August 2012.

### **How Will Project Knowledge, Models, and Curricula Be Shared?**

In addition to the dissemination that is formally built into the project through the hub structure, participating campuses will share their work through AAC&U dissemination channels and with the broader group of community colleges involved in The Democracy Commitment. We will encourage participants to use the conferences and disseminating

power of the two leading community college associations—The American Association of Community Colleges and the League for Innovation—as well. TDC also has been meeting as part of The American Democracy Project forum every June, which is sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. For AAC&U’s part, it regularly runs regional meetings focused on specialized topics including the humanities, education for personal and social responsibility, and diversity, learning, and inclusive excellence.<sup>4</sup> Should this proposal be funded, we would devote one or more meetings to the project themes over the course of the grant period. In addition, AAC&U’s annual meeting regularly attracts more than 2,000 higher education leaders, including a sizeable number of community college leaders to its events, and we will embed featured sessions related to the project’s work at each meeting within the grant period.

We would also deliberately engage participants in sharing project materials across several current projects at AAC&U, including *Developing a Community College Student Roadmap*, in which 12 community colleges are creating academic support programs that are tied to expected learning outcomes and that teach students to be active partners in their educational success, and *General Education for a Global Century*, in which 32 institutions are re-imagining the content and designs of a globally engaged general education, anchored in an exploration of global interdependence and American pluralism, questions of identity and community, and personal and social responsibility.

AAC&U also publishes three award-winning quarterlies, *Liberal Education*, *Peer Review*, and *Diversity & Democracy*, as well as the online publication, *On Campus with Women*, numerous monographs, many of which derive from funded projects, as well as an online newsletter for AAC&U member institutions that has a circulation of 23,000. All of these would be utilized to disseminate promising models, practices, and lessons learned from the project. Finally, the AAC&U website draws visitors from all sectors of higher education in the U.S. and abroad and annually receives 390,000 discrete visits that

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, our upcoming fall 2011 conferences, “Educating for Personal and Social Responsibility: A Twenty-First Century Imperative” ([www.aacu.org/meetings/psr11/index.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/meetings/psr11/index.cfm)) and “Arts & Humanities: Toward a Flourishing State?” ([www.aacu.org/meetings/ah11/index.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/meetings/ah11/index.cfm)).

originate outside of the Association. We would create a series of pages within the website to house project information, relevant links, and project materials and publications.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For two examples of project websites, visit *Core Commitments: Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility* ([www.aacu.org/core\\_commitments/index.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/core_commitments/index.cfm)) and *Shared Futures: Global Learning and Social Responsibility* ([www.aacu.org/SharedFutures/index.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/SharedFutures/index.cfm)).

## **Sources**

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