

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

# DIVERSITY AND DEMOCRACY: THE UNFINISHED WORK

In releasing this new edition of *The Drama of Diversity and Democracy* (*Drama*), the Association of American Colleges and Universities invites higher education to re-engage with one of our most foundational questions: the role educators can and should play in building civic capacities—knowledge, skills, commitments, collaborations—for our diverse and globally connected democracy. How does—and should—higher education help shape the future and secure the foundations of this nation’s still unfinished experiment with democracy?

Two decades ago, AAC&U launched a far-reaching, multi-project initiative titled “American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy and Liberal Learning.” Supported by major grants from private foundations and the federal government, American Commitments was a comprehensive decade-long effort to help higher education engage diversity as a resource for new excellence and as a catalyst for deeper understanding of the struggles for justice that—in 1992 and today—continue in US society. Over time, hundreds of colleges, universities, and community colleges became involved in the initiative, working together to bring new voices and communities into the curriculum, make campus life constructively intercultural, and tackle festering systemic problems in partnership with the wider community.

*Drama*, published in 1995, was the anchor report for the American Commitments initiative. Its analysis was framed by a distinguished National Panel of scholars and academic leaders (see page xii), who in turn were richly informed by two years of dialogue with faculty and leaders from all parts of higher education. The late Frank Wong, a highly respected and much-loved scholar then at the University of Redlands, provided initial drafts of the Panel’s analysis. When he died before the conclusion of the report, it became my own task—and privilege—as the project director to work with the entire Panel in completing the text. *Drama* was followed by three additional American Commitments reports<sup>1</sup> that collectively outlined ways of connecting diversity and democracy across (1) the overarching goals for liberal education and college learning; (2) the content of general education and major fields; and (3) all aspects of campus culture and town–gown relations.

As president of AAC&U, I am very proud of the role this association

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played in helping to make diversity—meaning respectful engagement with cultures and perspectives very different from one’s own AND the study of socially enforced inequalities with the goal of expanding equality—an expected part of a contemporary liberal education. Today, the majority of AAC&U’s member campuses make the study of diversity—at home and abroad—an integral part of their degree requirements.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, they build invaluable social capital that the United States sorely needs.

The educational principles, premises, and practices articulated through American Commitments also became foundational to AAC&U’s subsequent work on liberal education and making excellence inclusive, especially AAC&U’s current signature initiative, Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP). The LEAP vision for liberal education in the twenty-first century makes diversity and civic engagement central to its entire conception of college learning. Engaging with ideas, beliefs and experiences, and cultural traditions very different from one’s own, the AAC&U community believes, is a necessary part of any high-quality education, and a new basic both for success in the workplace and for civic problem-solving in our society.

Yet for all the progress Americans have made with diversity in the past two decades—within higher education and in our still evolving democracy—we also need to be conscious of the work that has NOT been accomplished and that still requires both commitment and creativity from educators and societal leaders alike.

Despite valiant efforts from all parts of our community, American society has not begun to achieve the equitable access to college—much less equitable completion of college degrees—that AAC&U leaders envisioned when we first created American Commitments. Our campuses value diversity and the majority of them are far more inclusive than they were a generation ago. But large parts of our society still remain far outside the gates when it comes to meaningful educational opportunity and access to prosperity.

Moreover, the social opportunity and mobility that Americans have long taken for granted as intrinsic and admirable features of our society have slowed dramatically in recent years. With the top 1 percent of Americans controlling more than 40 percent of the nation’s wealth, and with economic growth seemingly stalled, the quest to create a truly equitable democracy seems more challenging than ever.

And, regrettably, we still remain very far indeed from achieving the goal—heralded and promoted across all parts of the American Commitments initiative—of making the connections between diversity and democracy an expected and integral part of the college curriculum. Even as we have advanced the scholarly study of diversity and the use of intergroup pedagogies—formal and informal—democracy itself has fallen out of higher education’s core curriculum altogether.

AAC&U's goal for American Commitments was to ensure that college students—all college students—graduated both prepared and inspired to take active responsibility for building a more just, equitable, and inclusive democracy. But twenty years later, civic learning remains optional within the curriculum; diversity studies continue to assume core democratic principles without, for the most part, actually examining those principles; and—even as democratic movements and quests build strength around the world—democracy in any form is rarely part of the core curriculum at all.

Was democracy ever part of the standard college curriculum? In fact, it was. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, faculty members across higher education developed required courses—originally concerned with the problems of democracy and later called “Western Civilization” or “Western Heritage”—that were intentionally designed to acquaint college students with the institutions, ideas, principles and contestations that undergirded western democracies and, more broadly, the very idea of a free and self-governing society.<sup>3</sup>

By the last quarter of the century, these so-called “Western Civ” courses were rightly deemed both dated and inadequate: too partial in their vision for a global era, too exclusionary in the voices and texts they explored.<sup>4</sup> But when higher education turned away from what had been a widely taught “core course,” we did not create a new and more contemporary design for engaging students with democracy’s roots, constitutional principles, or foundational and continuing debates, either at home or abroad. Democratic movements are springing up all across the globe. But there is no expectation whatsoever that American college students should study these developments.

Today, our own democracy is riven by profound disagreements on the meaning and nature of federalism and on basic questions about the intended constitutional relations between church and state. The struggles over who belongs and who has meaningful access to opportunity still continue. We face as our major economic competitor a country—doing very well economically—that is not a democracy at all. We assume the future of our democracy, of course. But we are not asking the nation’s most highly educated citizens to think about what it will actually take to sustain it. And the core issues for a democratic republic—questions about the meaning of freedom, equality, human dignity, human rights, civil rights, justice and injustice—are, astoundingly, not “core” at all in the college curriculum.

Nor are these topics explored in the high school curriculum, whose textbooks assiduously seek to avoid any topic that might be controversial. Democracy is, by definition, and has been for all of its history, inherently controversial.

In 2012, a National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, formed with support from the US Department of Education, will

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release a far-reaching plan for national action to move civic learning from the periphery to the center of the college curriculum. Titled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, the Task Force's report and recommendations for action build from the good work done to date on many campuses in such areas as the study of diversity at home and abroad, service learning, intergroup dialogues, and a few outstanding campus models for making civic learning expected rather than optional across the curriculum and cocurriculum.

But the core message from this National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (on which I sit) is that islands of promising practice for civic learning in a diverse democracy are far from enough. A democratic society needs to take democracy seriously. And that means engaging college learners with democracy's multiple histories, presences, and futures—in all the ways that *Drama* outlined two decades ago.

Diversity and democracy need to be studied—and experienced—in generative relationship with one another. Neither construct is simple; the meaning of each is both contested and evolving. And yet, the interconnections between these two constructs provide a fundamental framing for the past, present, and future of US democracy, and, one may posit, for societies around the globe.

*Drama* explored the connections between diversity and democracy more directly than any other text we know— and so, on this anniversary year, we have decided to reissue the report and share it again with all AAC&U members.

We hope you will find this new edition of *Drama* thought-provoking and timely. But even more fundamentally, we hope you will use it as a prompt to spur new thinking—curricular and cocurricular—about ways to engage all college students with fundamental questions about the past, present, and future of the democratic quest, for all peoples and especially those for whom the full possibilities of democracy and freedom have yet to be achieved.

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## NOTES

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