

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
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Educating for democracy is at the heart of the University's mission. That's been true from the very beginning, from the moment our state legislature chartered this nation's first public university in 1789. It was the same period when those lawmakers were ratifying the United States Constitution, and it isn't a coincidence that founding a university happened alongside that milestone in American democracy. Preparing a rising generation for the rights and responsibilities of self-government was exactly what North Carolinians had in mind when they created the University.

It is difficult to look at the state of American civic life right now and conclude higher education is doing all we can to prepare our graduates for our democratic republic. Trust in American institutions is at or near all-time lows. Numerous respected surveys have found an alarming erosion of civic faith among the youngest Americans. Research by the Institute for Citizens & Scholars finds that 54% of young Americans are dissatisfied with the state of our democracy. And mastery of basic governing principles — separation of powers, free expression, equality before the law — remains alarmingly low among Americans of all ages.

All of this as we enter a highly contentious election year where the main source of news on all events — and misinformation about most of those events — is social media. That's not exactly an environment conducive to a renewed faith in our country's future.

That level of pessimism and civic illiteracy is simply not sustainable. Our universities — *especially* our public universities — must do more to support and defend democracy. We are proposing a new standard that every one of our graduates will learn the Foundations of American Democracy, analyzing the key concepts that underpin our system of government and discussing some of the most important writings that have moved our country closer to its founding ideals.

This is not a new idea. Colleges and universities have a long history of prioritizing democratic education. A course on citizenship was the first undergraduate requirement at Stanford University in 1923, and it remains a staple of their education curriculum today. Universities as different as Purdue and Johns Hopkins are also implementing course requirements focused on democracy.

What we're proposing is not a single, standardized course or a detailed prescription for civic education. Instead, we've worked closely with our faculty leaders in proposing two very concise, very broad learning outcomes that include foundational documents and reflections on

the struggle for democratic progress. These learning outcomes invite professors from across the system to teach the core concepts of American democracy in rigorous and creative ways, using their expertise to prepare our students for citizenship in a diverse society. The goal is to create a shared foundation, guaranteeing all our students an equal opportunity to participate in a well-informed and responsible manner.

We know that many of our students will learn about the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, and the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement as part of their high school experience. But many others receive only a cursory introduction to those concepts. Students from less resourced high schools, with fewer advanced courses or electives, are less likely to get the civic knowledge they need. For the sake of fundamental fairness, our public universities should offer a college-level encounter with the tenets of American democracy.

Our approach strikes the right balance for a public university. It answers the legitimate public interest in citizenship while respecting the expertise and intellectual freedom of our faculty, who can tackle democracy's big questions from different perspectives and different disciplines. You can address the Constitution and the Civil Rights Movement in a course on philosophy, on ethics, on history, law, political communication, or social movements. There are so many fantastic ways to approach these documents and concepts, and I'm excited to see the many ways our faculty will choose to engage students.

One of the great things about teaching the Foundations of American democracy is that these texts are themselves a starting point for debate. The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were subject to fierce debate and dissent at the time they were written. One of North Carolina's proudest contributions as a state was our refusal to ratify the Constitution until it gained the Bill of Rights. Our nation has been debating and litigating the meaning of that text ever since, and I'm eager to see our students continue that centuries-long conversation.

I have no doubt this policy will meet with some criticism, and I welcome thoughtful feedback and perspective. We have not traditionally created a shared learning requirement across our constituent institutions, and even with the wide academic latitude that's central to our approach, I know there will be some skepticism about prescribing content for our students to cover.

But where some may see undue deference to public priorities, I see a profound show of respect and confidence in the vitality of our university. To be entrusted with an obligation so fundamental, so core to the health of our society, is heartening to me. As I've said many times, a state that argues about the direction of higher education is *exactly* what we should want. And I'll worry about the fate of the University when the public is indifferent to what we teach rather than intensely interested in it.



I want to thank all the faculty representatives who worked so thoughtfully on developing these learning outcomes, and all those who have voiced support for our role in preparing students for democratic life. Now if we could just figure out how to refresh adults' understanding of these matters as well...