To: Michael Lightner, Vice President Academic Affairs, CU System
From: Bob Ferry, Chair, Boulder Faculty Assembly
Re.: Civics Literacy
Date: November 21, 2018
Cc.: Joanne Addison, Chair, Faculty Council

On September 7, 2018, the University Affairs Committee of the University of Colorado Board of Regents sent a memorandum to Professor Joanne Addison, Chair of the Faculty Council, calling on the faculty to consider ways to address what the Committee calls the civic literacy of CU students. The memorandum asks for a faculty response to five questions: whether a definable set of civics knowledge should be required for admission to CU; whether all CU students should be required to take a single civics course; whether currently-existing courses should be designated as satisfying a civics requirement; whether affined faculty would want to develop a certificate program in civics; and whether, if there were a civics requirement, students should be able to satisfy the requirement by some means other than course work (for instance, by passing an appropriate exam).

Professor Addison passed on the September 7 memo to the Boulder Faculty Assembly. Ahead of the October 4 General Assembly meeting, all BFA representatives were provided with the general content of the memo and a set of talking points. CU system Vice President Michael Lightner was invited to attend the October meeting. During the last portion of the meeting, the Assembly convened in executive session in order to read and freely discuss the memo, to engage VP Lightner in dialogue about it, and to consider discuss Boulder's response to the University Affairs Committee's five questions. More than sixty faculty representing units and departments from across the campus were present for this discussion. Interested faculty were invited to attend follow-up meetings, and three of these were held over the next ten days. In addition, on several successive Mondays, the Boulder Faculty Assembly Executive Committee, comprised of the BFA standing committee chairs and representatives from all of CU Boulder's schools and colleges, discussed both the memo and the direction that Boulder's response should take. The BFA chair presented the regents' request and the ongoing discussions related to the faculty response to the provost's Deans Council on October 2 and to the provost's Chairs and Directors breakfast meeting on October 12. The BFA chair has had several conversations about the request and the response with Provost Moore and with Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Assessment Katherine Eggert. The ideas and information gathered on these occasions were incorporated in an initial draft of this report, which was discussed and approved by the BFA Executive Committee. That draft has been modified and edited based on ample feedback from both faculty and campus administrators.

A considerable variety of ideas and opinions was expressed on these occasions. At the same time, there was a general consensus that the regents' University Affairs Committee is right to be concerned that there is a widespread need for greater civics literacy. Furthermore, more than a few members of the Boulder faculty are interested in finding ways—as long as they are

consistent with our educational mission and pedagogical standards—to address this problem. And finally, the Boulder faculty, acknowledging that the University of Colorado is a public institution, welcomes inquiry about our curriculum, from the Board of Regents or from any other group of Colorado citizens, elected or otherwise.

Civics at CU Boulder.

1. This report is a response to the University Affairs Committee's questions, although not in the form of up-or-down, yes-or-no, answers to the five questions. Instead, the intention is to provide ideas and comments in response to what the BFA understands to be the spirit and the intent of the Committee's September 7 memorandum. The BFA emphasizes that its consideration of the enhancement of civics education pertains only to the Boulder campus, not the CU system as a whole, and it calls on the Committee to consider all of the campus responses separately, respectful of the considerable autonomy that each of the campuses has over their curriculums. In order to be excellent and effective, curriculum needs to be shaped and determined by those faculty who are most qualified to decide what should be taught and how. Everyone shares the opinion that transportation safety is very important (and we all want good civics), but the faculty who teach poetry are entirely willing to let the engineering faculty decide how best to teach quality bridge construction.

2. Generally, for two kinds of reasons, the faculty does not support a testable, fact-based standard of civics knowledge (for admission or for graduation), or a single civics-based course required of all CU Boulder undergraduate students.

2a. One category of our reasoning is essentially structural. There is no good way to identify entering students' civics deficiencies. Current admissions practice does require that students who are admitted but do not meet minimum academic preparation standards (MAPS) in certain academic areas (geography, foreign language, math) take a CU course or courses to remedy those deficiencies. But the MAPS determination is based on the student's high school transcript, and the those transcripts almost universally do not indicate civics-related instruction. Short of administering a diagnostic test, which—trusting the validity of the high school record—the University has never done, there is no way to know what entering students know about civics. In addition, the idea of a single course required of all students presents a structural problem at CU Boulder, where there is no campus-wide curriculum. Each of the several schools and colleges would have to decide how to incorporate such a course into their existing requirements. The issues and difficulties involved in adding an additional course, or replacing

an existing course with a civics course, would necessarily need to be resolved by the individual schools and colleges. For the near future, the lack of a common curriculum represents a significant impediment to the idea of a single course for all students.

2b. The Boulder faculty finds a second, more basic, problem with the idea of fact-based and information-testable civics instruction (pedagogies which are implicit in the concepts of an admissions standard, a single course for all students, and a mechanism for "testing out" of the proposed requirement). Instruction of this kind will not accomplish the University Affairs Committee's stated goal of assuring that students acquire "an *understanding* of the founding documents, the structure, functions and operation of the federal government and some knowledge of the evolution of our governing documents." That this is true is made evident by the widespread lack of civics understanding that the Committee references in its memorandum. Across the nation, middle- and high-school students are required to take courses that introduce them to civics. That after high school they demonstrably retain so little of what they are taught arguably can be linked to the pedagogy that shaped the instruction that they received in the first place (which presumably privileges information over understanding). The CU Boulder faculty can only embrace the kind of instruction that is fully focused on the Committee's charge to make civics *understanding* the primary goal. Students at CU Boulder are taught to expect that all of their courses will teach them to strive for understanding by developing critical thinking skills that are intellectually challenging, rigorous, and usually discipline-specific. The faculty share a concern, therefore, that, if such critical thinking is not brought fully to bear in the area of civics education, the outcome would not only be likely to fail, but might in fact backfire, in that it is easy to imagine that a required course or test that lacked CU Boulder's customary intellectual rigor could easily be seen by students as simply burdensome, trivial, or worse.

3. The CU Boulder faculty does see considerable merit in the possibilities raised by the University Affairs Committee's question regarding the idea of "developing a certificate program in civics." By also asking what such a program might look like, the Committee encourages the faculty to engage in further consideration of a broader and more comprehensive approach to the problems of civic education. The path forward cannot be very clear at this point, in that concrete plans necessarily will be developed by a collaborative effort of system and campus administration in partnership with the Boulder faculty. Based on the several recent conversations among the faculty, the BFA offers the following ideas and suggestions.

3a. The certificate program concept implies a set of courses that share a common theme or area of interest. A possible organizational concept for such a program could be based on a fundamental vision articulated in the CU Boulder's recently published Academic Futures Report. The Report clearly expresses the idea that as a public university civic education is a central component of our core mission:

> "We enable each generation of citizens to remake our democracy by equipping them with skills of critical reasoning and analysis, and a broad sense of civic obligation to the state, the nation, and the world."[1]

The actual composition of the program, its administrative structure and the courses which would constitute it, would need to be determined. The following are considerations which should be used to make those determinations.

3b. The program would require resources. Any meaningful consideration of the nature and scope of the program needs to be predicated on what resources might be available for it.

3c. The program would need an administrative structure. Determining what this would be, including where in the campus structure the program would be located, is a matter of fundamental importance. Given its campus-wide composition, the BFA believes that its three relevant standing committees (Academic Affairs, Faculty Affairs, Student Affairs), in shared governance collaboration with the campus provost, are qualified to carry out these deliberations and to make recommendations. Students should also be consulted; see 3e. below.

3d. The administration of the program should be newly-constituted, and should not be dependent on or closely linked to existing departments or entities on the Boulder campus. There are different reasons why this is important. Teaching capacity is one concern. For instance, the Department of Political Science, despite its obvious affinities for a civics-focused program, presently has more majors than it has had in a decade, now numbering more than 900 students, and its current faculty would be hard-pressed to take on additional teaching or program administration responsibilities. A different concern argues that it would be unwise for the proposed program to be initially or directly affiliated with CU Boulder's Center for Western Civilization, Thought and Policy, as has been suggested. The faculty who gave the regents' University Affairs Committee's questions careful thought believe that the best results for a civics-centered program would come from a process that draws from widely gathered input and gives no predisposed preference to a department, discipline, or any existing campus entity. The CWCTP would no doubt provide a valuable perspective and worthwhile input to the process, but it should not be identified at the outset as the preferred administrative location for the program.

3e. On the Boulder campus, students are valued as full partners in the learning experience. The Department of Political Science reports that PSCI 1101, Introduction to American Politics, is taught to about 500 undergraduate students every semester. Scores of additional students take other Political Science courses that also address aspects of basic civics. Given their interest, together with both the experience and the knowledge that they have gotten (or not

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[1] *Report of the Academic Futures Committee* (October 2018), p. 6. Online at: https://www.colorado.edu/academicfutures/sites/default/files/attached-files/academic_futures_report_100118_final.pdf

gotten) from these—and perhaps other—existing courses, students can provide invaluable insights. Whenever feasible, student surveys and interviews would be useful for the process of determining the content and the learning outcomes of a civics education program.

3f. An elective certificate program—or a set of shared-focus courses—that includes a substantial civics education dimension is obviously far removed from the idea of a single course required of all CU Boulder students. But an effective program, administered from a wide faculty base that includes different disciplines and a variety of points of view, could well be the basis for a significant increase in civics learning across the campus. What is more, the Board of Regents University Affairs Committee's call for consideration of enhanced civics instruction comes at a uniquely opportune moment on the Boulder campus. Last week, after months of wide-spread discussion by faculty and administration as part of the collective Academic Futures endeavor, Provost Russ Moore and Senior Vice Chancellor Kelly Fox announced the proximate implementation of two projects that are expected to have a significantly transformative impact on the campus. These two important initiatives, "Creating a Common Student-Centered Approach to Learning" and "Interdisciplinary Teaching, Research and Creative Work," are both projects that could easily provide structure and impetus for the enhanced civics education goal.[2]

Going forward.

Working with the Boulder provost and with the support of the Board of Regents, the Boulder faculty welcomes the opportunity to expand its curriculum in the direction called for by the University Affairs Committee. The Boulder Faculty Assembly sees the present report as its response to the questions asked by the Committee, and as such sees the report as a second step in what the BFA hopes will be a continuing conversation about the best ways to accomplish what we regard as a shared goal.

[2] *CU Boulder Today*, November 15, 2018. Online at https://www.colorado.edu/today/2018/11/15/academic-futures-student-centered-focus-interdisciplinary-work-named-lead-projects