

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

The INAUGURAL SYMPOSIUM: DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

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Prepared remarks

It is a genuine pleasure to participate in this symposium, which engages a topic of crucial and timely importance for higher education and our society at large. I am also delighted to join my colleagues in celebrating the appointment of Cristle Collins Judd to the presidency of Sarah Lawrence College. An accomplished and passionate leader, Dr. Judd brings to Sarah Lawrence deep wisdom and a longstanding dedication to the values of liberal education, the arts and humanities, and scholarship. In a time of so many daunting challenges to higher education and to our nation, it is especially gratifying to have Cristle Collins Judd leading Sarah Lawrence, one of our finest and most impactful liberal arts institutions.

In reflecting on our topic, education and democracy, I am drawn to the essential—and distinctive—role that liberal education must play in fostering the aims of a functioning democracy, perhaps especially so in a world riven by conflict and a nation divided along deep ideological lines with the prospect of compromise nowhere in sight. Indeed, I would suggest that liberal education remains a powerful and irreplaceable force for good—for individuals, for society, for the world, and for the future. This belief is not new. The arguments in support of a liberal education were first mustered by the Founding Fathers, who believed deeply in the value of an educated citizenry, both for their personal wellbeing and for an enlightened democracy. It was through their inspiration that a national movement, unprecedented in history and now in its third century, created the most extensive and comprehensive system of higher education that the world has known. At its core, this system was dedicated to advancing as widely as possible the benefits of a liberal education.

This educational vision encompasses, then as now, more than a curricular inventory. Liberal education comprehends the process whereby one acquires critical skills, accumulates knowledge, and learns how to navigate individually and socially in a complex and rapidly changing world. This approach requires students to gather, analyze, and synthesize information in myriad ways that are appropriate to vast and varying areas of study. In so doing, they acquire diverse problem-solving skills in addition to specific knowledge, such that long after the facts have faded from memory the

strategies developed in the course of mastering material are appreciated in their own right as tools for navigating a life of purpose and meaning.

Moreover, the path of liberal learning must include an ethical component. For students and citizens to engage in a life of discovery and purpose they must examine how to make their own moral judgments while learning about the ethical reasoning of others, both as individuals and in community. How do communities constitute values, meaning, religion, politics, ideology? What is the role of art and the humanities in developing a narrative imagination of how one might live, make ethical decisions or cultivate community? What are models of social leadership to develop the common good? In its practice, liberal education teaches persons the moral and intellectual responsibilities—both socially and individually—of protecting, preserving, and expanding freedom.

In the fullness of time the seeds of liberal education build democracy and provide its citizens the capacity to address the great challenges of our time, now and always.