Dear Penn Friends:

In Fall 2020, our University will again welcome a new group of undergraduates: the Class of 2024. As always, they will participate in a number of activities welcoming them to, and preparing them for, this exciting next phase of their lives. But this is in many other senses, of course, a year unlike any other we have experienced: one that has called us to make sacrifices and take action in unexpected ways that continue to evolve.

In recognition of both Penn’s ongoing traditions, and our commitment to facing current challenges, the President and Provost have selected Civic Engagement (YoCE) as Penn’s Academic Theme Year for 2020-21. Programming for the year will be considerably expanded, with opportunities to participate open to the entire Penn Community.

As President Amy Gutmann described it in her initial announcement, the year “will include programs, workshops, student-led dialogues, and opportunities to engage with the communities outside our campus, from our immediate West Philadelphia neighborhood, to our surrounding city as it recovers from the pandemic, to the wider circle of our nation and our world. These activities will acquire particular potency in our US election year, in which we know many of you will be involved, which will span from the campaign and election in the fall semester to the inauguration and its aftermath in the spring semester. At the same time, the year will draw on Penn’s historic tradition of civic engagement. We were founded by Benjamin Franklin with a vision of a non-sectarian school to educate the leaders of a growing city, with a focus on practical impact on contemporary life.” Below, you can read a fuller description of the Year and its goals.

Honoring a 30-year old tradition, the Year of Civic Engagement will be introduced to our incoming first-year students through the Penn Reading Project (PRP), which will consist of four short pieces of writing, and one 30-minute film documentary, all of which will be available through Canvas:

- James Baldwin: “My Dungeon Shook (A Letter to My Nephew)”
- Benjamin Franklin: “Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania”
- Martin Luther King: “The Purpose of Education”
- Toni Morrison: “Home” (from The Source of Self-Regard)
- Song of Parkland (directed by Amy Schatz)

Our incoming students will once again be assigned to small groups, where they will interact with each other and a Penn mentor who will serve as a group facilitator. But several factors will be new this year. Interaction will begin earlier—before students arrive on campus—and continue through the year. In addition to discussing the readings, participants will work in teams to develop and implement on-going civic engagement projects. The role of PRP / Year of Civic Engagement facilitator-mentor will be open to all members of the Penn community, including faculty, staff, and upper division undergraduate and graduate students. Information will be circulated shortly on how to sign up.

For more on the Year of Civic Engagement, please contact:

Office of New Student Orientation and Academic Initiatives
Provost-NSO-AI@pobox.upenn.edu

Our great thanks to all of you for your interest in the Year of Civic Engagement, and we look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,
David Fox
Director, New Student Orientation & Academic Initiatives