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Our future depends on civically engaged students

Civic engagement is an essential part of the college experience. As interim president, I am proud of the engagement students at Dakota County Technical College and Inver Hills Community College have shown. As Election Day approaches, our Student Senates are leading Get Out the Vote efforts to encourage students to vote on November 6.

Giving students opportunities to be informed, engaged citizens strengthens our communities. One of the historic charges of public higher education is to promote democratic values and appreciation of a free and diverse society, a charge memorialized in Minnesota statute. The fact that our Student Senates are so involved in this educational effort is a great sign for our future.

For many students, the upcoming elections are their first time registering to vote and navigating the process. Our students have organized fun events like root beer socials, and they have visited many classrooms to talk about voter registration and absentee or early voting. They are also collaborating with other organizations, such as LeadMN and the League of Women Voters, to conduct nonpartisan outreach. One such group shared with me how proud they were with our students' efforts.

Students at our colleges are also experiencing the campaigning process firsthand. They recently invited candidates for Minnesota's 2nd Congressional District, Congressman Jason Lewis and candidate Angie Craig, to campus to meet with students. We are also hosting a forum with these two candidates later this week, sponsored by the Dakota County Regional Chamber of Commerce. I am glad that our campuses can serve as a community-gathering place for these important conversations.

The 2nd Congressional District candidates will discuss important workforce development issues. At DCTC and Inver Hills, we develop critical career and technical skills. With so much regional and national attention on our workforce shortages, we should not forget that colleges also develop the general education skills important to our workforce and to thoughtful civic participation. We teach our students to keep an open mind—to understand issues by seeking information, to ask questions, and to analyze what they are reading and hearing. This includes thinking critically about the messages of political campaigns.

Diverse perspectives are encouraged on our campuses, and I'm pleased to see that our Student Senates treat each other with respect, even though they are passionate, and their political views vary widely. Their ability to work together on the Get Out the Vote initiative is a great example.

These students are the future leaders of our communities. It's promising to see so many of them taking their right to vote seriously. I hope we will follow their example on November 6.

Michael Berndt, Interim President of Dakota County Technical College & Inver Hills Community College

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