

EDITORIAL

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Celebrate citizenship, education

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In an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson smudged out a single word and replaced it with the word "citizens." He really obliterated the unwanted word — so intent was he on changing it — and for more than two centuries, historians wondered what word he had so completely scratched out in favor of the word "citizens."

Just three years ago, using modern spectral imaging technology developed for military use, the Library of Congress revealed that the word he removed from the early text was "subjects." Not subjects. Citizens. Not "tell me what to do," but "let me participate" — perhaps the very essence of our American Revolution.

It is appropriate that we explore the difference between subjects and citizens as we mark Constitution Day today, and less than a week after we commemorated the heroism on 9/11 in New York City, in Washington, D.C., and in the skies over Somerset. At Mount Aloysius College (just miles from Somerset), we choose a theme each year and coordi-

nate student orientation, first-year seminars, our Speakers Series and other events around that single idea. After a year on Civil Discourse and a second year on Finding Home in a Changing World, our theme this year is citizenship, specifically "21st Century Citizenship: The Common Good." In a way, it is our own yearlong opportunity to explore the difference between citizens and subjects.



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This conversation began more than 20 centuries ago, when Greek thinkers grappled with the ideas of citizenship and common good. They argued about the notion of a communal life in the polis, the Greek city-state, and about the conflicts inherent between the wants of the individual and the needs of the community. Plato and Aristotle led the early debates, taken up in later centuries by Christian theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, by political theorists like Locke and Rousseau and by early American practitioners like Ben Franklin and Paul Revere.

That conversation continued right into America's revolution. Jefferson saw a

direct link between education and citizenship, and believed that for full citizenship, all our citizens had to be educated. He went further, opining that in addition to moral education, students should receive academic training, which Jefferson hoped, in the words of one biographer, "would prepare their critical reasoning skills to meet the challenges posed by democracy."

So citizenship, participating in democracy, is the higher calling, and apparently the founders who endorsed the Declaration of Independence felt the same — citizens, not subjects. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis observed almost two centuries after the signing of that document that "the most important office in our democracy is that of private citizen," and thus drew a line direct to Jefferson's distinction between a mere "subject" and a vaunted "citizen."

One other thought on the connection between citizenship and education. In 1930 Eleanor Roosevelt penned an essay on "Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education," in a magazine called Pictorial Review. In it, she argued that "the true purpose of education is to produce citizens" and she outlined all the ways that an educational system does that — from the

simple "acquisition of knowledge" that may help one day to critically analyze an economic issue to the "development of powers of concentration and accuracy which...help analyze a difficult situation."

She also saw a connection to citizenship from "social activities and athletics" that are part of one's education. She argued that these activities "develop team play, cooperation and thought and consideration for others" — something to do with the common good one might say.

We applaud the key role played by education and by educators (and not just those who educate in the classroom) in the promotion of the cognitive and moral qualities of citizenship on Constitution Day. We recognize that this connection (between education and citizenship) is key to the practice of "full" citizenship — thinking critically about the issues of the day, discussing them civilly with each other, lifting a hand to help out in the community and certainly pulling the lever to vote — honoring the opportunity.

Someone once wrote that America's first words were "we, the people." Citizens, not subjects. Education, not indifference. Let me participate, not tell me what to do. On this Constitution Day — "We, the People" — indeed.