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To the Honorable Members of the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress:

President Obama reminded us in his State of the Union address, “America thrived in the 20th century because we made high school free, sent a generation of GIs to college, and trained the best workforce in the world. But in a 21st century economy that rewards knowledge like never before, we need to do more.” He has unveiled a plan for free community college education.

With these words the President presented Congress with an unprecedented opportunity to solve many of our nation’s greatest challenges – a lack of affordable higher education, stagnant wages, stubborn pockets of poverty and fierce global economic competition. Without his leadership, we wouldn’t have arrived at this pivotal moment for educational opportunity. But the keys to unlock the future potential growth of America are now firmly in your hands.

We write as leaders of the nation’s community college campuses, trustees, policy advisors and advocates. We all stand ready to work with one another and with Congress to make this promise a reality. As we have in the past with collaborations that strengthen our institutions such as Democracy’s Colleges: A Call to Action to Address the Completion Agenda, we can assist our nation’s lawmakers in seizing this moment to ensure America’s College Promise.

Let’s remember that the nearly 14 million community college students are your constituents. They are Red, Blue and Independents. They are old and young. They are black and white, Latino, Asian – the very mosaic of our society. Our students are diverse, but they are all striving to obtain skills for good jobs, to launch a four-year degree, and to achieve economic security for themselves and their families. But their demand is outpacing what we can supply.

As mission-driven not-for-profits, we offer by far the best value in higher education, and we have fought against the odds to keep our tuition and fees low. Our average annual cost to students is \$3,264, compared to \$8,893 for a public four-year college and \$30,090 for a private four-year college. But students still have to pay rent, use transportation, buy books, feed themselves and for many, their children. Our students often come from families and communities on the losing side of the country’s expanding economic inequality. Millions are priced out of college, or taking on debt that will drag them down for decades.

With open doors to all we are 1,200 colleges strong, in cities, suburbs and rural areas nationwide. As members of local communities in every state in the nation, community colleges know about collaboration. Our leaders have worked successfully for decades with both Republican and Democratic administrations, as well as many for-profit institutions. We will need to find additional support to expand our underfunded system. However, educational and economic opportunity is our mission and we can meet the challenge.

By funding community college education, Congress can make one of the most profitable investments in the national economy. The business community is clamoring for a better educated workforce. It is estimated that as many as 3 million job openings in the US go unfilled for months on end, as roughly half of employers now say they are having a hard time finding qualified workers to hire, particularly in technical fields. Community colleges provide students with the necessary training to fill that gap. A recent study found that on an individual level, every \$1 a student invests in his or her community college education yields, on average, a return on investment (ROI) of \$3.80. But for taxpayers, the ROI per dollar is even better: \$6.80 over the course of students’ working lives.

Consider then that with the unsustainable escalation of tuition, our nation has amassed \$1 trillion in student loan debt – and many end up defaulting. Every dollar we invest now is one we don't have to pay later – particularly when Americans are without the skills they need, unemployed, or working for such low wages that they are forced to depend on social services. Community college graduates earn 20 percent more than their peers with high school diplomas. We applaud the President's suggestion for sharing the burden – students do their part through maintaining solid grades, and the State and Federal government use the people's money to create more graduates, well-paid workers and contributing taxpayers.

The 78<sup>th</sup> US Congress passed the GI Bill, creating the catalyst for the greatest economic expansion in our nation's history and constructing a middle class that the world would envy. As members of the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, you too can go down in history having opened the doors of opportunity to the American people. Members, we ask you respectfully, don't squander this moment. Fulfill America's College Promise.

*Walter G. Bumphus, President and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges.*

*J. Noah Brown, President and CEO, Association of Community College Trustees*

*Gerardo de los Santos, President and CEO, The League for Innovation in the Community College*

*Evelyn Waiwaiole, Director, Center for Community College Student Engagement*

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*William Trueheart, President and CEO, Achieving the Dream*