Higher education's duty to defend democracy

Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021

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During a time where the public's perception of higher education festers, hyper-partisanship stymies respectful dialogue across difference, and autocrats around the world upend post-secondary ideals, Ronald J. Daniels (with the help of Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector) outlines *What Universities Owe Democracy*. In this book by Johns Hopkins University's president, there is a detailed look at how the US higher education system historically fostered democracy. More importantly, the text offers ways the postsecondary industry can realign itself on a path positioned toward the public good.

While the text is situated primarily within the USA, the authoritarian issues facing universities emulate across the globe with various levels of severity. In the Introduction, Daniels presents recent political events that have hindered higher education's ability to effectively execute its missions. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán weakened the autonomy of the nation's universities and targeted policies that led to the exodus of Central European University. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan imposed executive orders to fire and arrest academics, while granting himself the authority to appoint university leaders. Even as the USA invested in its Historically Black Colleges and Universities, President Donald J. Trump employed national policies (e.g., travel bans) alongside bombastic rhetoric that had polarizing ramifications throughout the system. While the scope of these three examples varies, it is no secret that academia has problems.

The illustrations are unsurprising as universities' missions, as Daniels sees it, are at odds with authoritarian temperaments. Universities seek to promote freedom of inquiry from diverse perspectives; they aim to be grounded in knowledge and facts, which is at a clear dissonance to the dissimulation posited by autocratic regimes. Conversely, 'liberal democracy' is in concert with higher education's purpose as the system aimed at facilitating competing conceptions of the public good yet maintaining appropriate individual autonomy and dignity.

The author's cardinal claim is thus: colleges and universities cannot sit idly by with democracy under incessant stress. Since higher education organizations shape society through action (and inaction), it would be scandalous to watch the decay of political structures when they can play such an additive role. After all, the world is at a critical juncture

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with a global pandemic, economic challenges, antidemocratic populism, and a fragile international order. To that end, Daniels renders four key functions to map the road forward for our beloved universities: social mobility, civic education, stewardship of facts, and purposeful pluralism. Daniels organizes the argument and structure of the book around these four themes, and these are Chapters 1–4.

Social mobility

Recognizing higher education as the catalyst for social mobility is not something new. Daniels describes how (rare) federal legislation, visionaries like Clark Kerr (who was revered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and need-blind admission policies during the middle of the twentieth century created an accessible post-secondary system. Yet, social stratification occurred. The recommendations are thus: re-strengthening Pell Grants (which are targeted toward low-income students), supporting aid programs with states matching federal dollars, and abandoning legacy admissions. The last-mentioned is likely to meet stark opposition, but every seat given to children of alumni (generally, Whiter and wealthier) hinders social mobility for traditionally disadvantaged, yet talented, applicants.

Civic education

For the education of citizens, the author believes that universities have historically been too reliant on letting K-12 schools handle such. Higher education should take stake in this as evidence from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study shows, countries—with Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Estonia leading the way—that have the highest civic knowledge scores generally have the highest marks on the Varieties of Democracy Liberal Democracy Index. Instilling civic competencies, such as the skills of reasoning and persuasion, is something for which higher education is built. Daniels calls for universities to move beyond volunteer service opportunities by instituting democracy graduation requirements. Indeed, this might look as diverse as the assortment of the world's postsecondary institutions, but one example offered is Purdue University's exit exam that tests civic knowledge.

Stewardship of facts

To combat the sobering challenge inherent in the reproducibility crisis, where most academic articles are unable to be replicated, Daniels asks for the embracement of open science. With universities functioning as research enterprises and facts being a vital piece of democracy in the age of misinformation, higher education must double down on its efforts to harvest discoveries with reliable results. The open science movement allows the public to easily access and understand academic publications, freely review data, and openly source software code. Complementing this openness are ethical guardrails, where Daniels begins to think through peer review, contextualization (i.e., the reconsideration of how to communicate across audiences), and equity in research representation.

Purposeful pluralism

The fourth chapter in this book is about pluralism, which is the capacity for democracy to give voice to diverse human experiences. To foster this contour on campuses, colleges need to take the step that follows diversifying their student bodies by reimagining student encounters and modelling programmatic debate. Purposeful pluralism comes with the reinstitution of random roommate assignments, where first-year students engage with people unlike themselves instead of self-selecting or being segregated into homogeneous groups. For debate programming, schools ought to model the conversations they seek to nourish by supplementing the speaker circuit with deep discussions around topical issues.

These four chapters draw on a wealth of prior research and make a compelling case. (Daniels is an attorney by training.) Higher education has previously served students and society well, but work is needed now more than ever to enhance the public good. The solid ideation notwithstanding, there are limitations in the text. In the spirit of pluralism, here are a few considerations.

Daniels acknowledges the array of college types, yet he usually employs case studies from elite universities. I believe he underplays how challenging executing elements of the four functions will be for financially stressed schools with declining enrolments and broken business models. Surely, they need to fill seats first to stay afloat, even if that sadly means maintaining legacy admissions or forgoing random roommate assignments (to avoid unnecessary outcry, however temporary it may be) at the peril of their immediate part in the public good. In other words, schools will need to choose their ‘fights’ carefully.

For the financial aid proposals, the US government can certainly provide more money to schools. However, without better accountability measures for tuition rates, I fear the Bennett Hypothesis (Bennett, 1987)—where increases in financial aid will lead to higher tuition as universities capture the funds themselves—will ring true.

Finally, the impending cultural resistance to change in instituting civic graduation requirements is likely to be laborious. Though the solution to this critique might hold the disposition of socializing facts via open science, the tumult from critical race theory alone shows significant challenges ahead (Flaherty, 2021). Furthermore, the internal shared governance structures along with the faith faculty have in administrators (and vice versa) will surely generate unforeseeable tensions. The Purdue civic requirement initially failed at the faculty level but was instituted by the board, nonetheless. The reception at other higher education organizations might be more taxing.

Make no mistake, Daniels’ background as a higher education leader situates him well to proffer big ideas. His experience and expertise elucidate lively examples of how liberal democracy and the university interplay both in the past and present. The result, I think, is a rich future worth fighting for.

If the reader somehow forgets, though, Daniels is unquestionably a university president. This surfaces on several occasions when he stresses that Johns Hopkins is America’s first research university, or when he boasts about the international role the university played with the Coronavirus Resource Center, the recognized financial support from Michael Bloomberg (who has the first review on the back cover), and how students helped forge a long-term diversity plan following the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland.

What Universities Owe Democracy will have a clear audience in higher education from leaders (including board members) that curate the mission to those that carry it out in the classroom (including students). Anyone concerned with higher education’s role in the public good, especially researchers and practitioners, will find the book well worth the read.

I fully expect additional ideas and deep discourse to proliferate following its circulation. This, in turn, will serve society well as people inside higher education organizations work toward moving democracy forward.

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