

Higher Education: Some Answers to Challenges

What Universities Owe Democracy,

Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve, Phillip Spector, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021, pp. 322, \$19.86 hardcover.

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It is not unusual for members of the academic establishment to ask the question what more can government do for their institutions. Additional trillions of dollars is typically offered as a good beginning. The American Council on Education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and the National Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities make such proclamations regularly. The question in Ronald J. Daniels' new book, written with his administrative colleagues Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, however, is not often asked.

The president of Johns Hopkins University, Daniels has an unusual

background and perspective. Born into a family of German Jews who narrowly escaped Nazi Germany in 1939 by immigrating to Canada, he worked his way up the academic ladder by graduating from the University of Toronto and its law school. Rather than practicing law, he moved early to academic administration, becoming provost at the University of Pennsylvania and then rising to the Hopkins presidency in 2009.

While experiences at Hopkins where all the authors worked surely influenced the book, the particular problems of the three Hopkins campuses are not the focus of this publication. The undergraduate and graduate Homewood campus is located adjacent to some neighborhoods afflicted by Baltimore's high crime rate. When Hopkins proposed expanding its campus police force and patrolling in the streets nearby, noisy anti-police protests erupted among some community associations and were supported, according to a student poll, by 75 percent of the University's undergraduates. But in 2019 the University prevailed in the Maryland General Assembly. The year before, some Hopkins students argued against contractual relationships with the

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federal government's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency which were held by the University and some individual professors. Almost 2,000 signatures were amassed urging that these ICE contracts—\$7 million in 37 contracts since 2008—“violate human rights” and go “against the University’s values,” but Daniels refused to end the contracts. So despite its \$8.8 billion endowment and very selective admissions standards for its more than 26,000 students, the fact is that Hopkins is the largest employer in Baltimore and the largest recipient of federal grants among all research universities. Hopkins cannot be and does not wish to be an aloof ivory tower.

Daniels and his two colleagues had broad motivations for writing their book. They begin by voicing a deep despair about the growth of illiberalism or populism in countries that could lay some claim to being democracies—Brazil, Hungary, India, the Philippines, and Turkey, and of course, the United States. About Trump, the book suggests, “His genius was in understanding and exploiting the resentments, the anxieties, and the vulnerabilities of these voters, many of whom have been on the losing side of the globalization’s steady march over the last several decades.” There is, however, a grudging respect

for some Trump administration policies—increasing the level of federal research support, more permanent funding for HBCUs, reformation of existing Title IX guidelines, and questioning whether racial preferences in admissions had gone too far. About the latter two initiatives, the book’s language uses very careful lawyerly language—“it is hard to characterize them [Trump’s positions] as being squarely outside of the boundaries of what have been, for many years, long standing conservative policy positions.” (6)

What Universities owe Democracy is organized around four themes. (1) Higher education is essential to a flourishing democracy; (2) universities continue to acquire this role over time; (3) over the last several decades, however, they have faltered in this role and; (4) universities have a responsibility to act in defense of the liberal democratic experiment. (20)

In their conclusion, Daniels et al. make four formal recommendations.

The first is to end “legacy admissions and restore federal aid.” There is now a more general critique of legacy admissions in higher education circles and Hopkins has addressed them. Certainly for public campuses supported by the taxes of all citizens, it is a hard practice to justify. The book argues:

Legacy admissions tend to be wealthier and whiter, and to have college-educated parents, which means that there are fewer seats for low-income, underrepresented minority and first generation applicants. Eliminating legacy admissions is an essential step for creating opportunity and burnishing the promise of higher education for all meritorious students. (242)

Accompanying this step should be a “massive recommitment of the federal government” to expand student aid. This move toward equality, however, should, according to the authors, not be achieved by “eliminating standardized testing.”

The book contains no empirical information on how large the legacy admissions problem is on various campuses. Does it substantially distort merit standards or function mostly as a tie breaker among similar applicants? For some smaller liberal arts colleges, family legacies may help in their survival in terms of financial support.

The second requirement: “institute a democracy requirement for graduation.” The authors note, “For many decades, American higher education has been content to let K-12

education carry the burden of an education in democracy.” (242) Since universities receive students “on the cusp of assuming the responsibilities of citizenship,” they should be more proactive in their preparation for that task. What would such preparation look like? The authors list “a knowledge of democratic history, theory and practice; skills and reasoning, persuasion, and interaction with political institutions and community organizations; an embrace of core democratic values like tolerance and dignity of all people; and aspirations toward cooperation and collective action.” These are competencies to be “instilled” according to the book, but it is not clear how this is to be done. Particularly absent is a requirement about understanding constitutional values and legal systems which could be taught and measured. Without such an understanding, student political activities may be unrealistic and frustrated.

The third standard is to “embrace open science with guardrails.” The authors praise the contributions of science to the health of democracy, but note what they call the “reproducibility crisis” where important scientific claims cannot be replicated. This is a problem also identified by David Randall and Christopher Welser in their report for the National

Association of Scholars, which finds that data flaws in numerous scientific reports are frequently undiscovered and their conclusions cannot be replicated.¹ How exactly to move simultaneously towards greater speed and transparency in science to address something like the Covid pandemic, for example, is not made very specific in Daniels' book.

The fourth and final recommendation is to "reimagine student encounters on campus and infuse debate into campus programming." The book urges that "universities should structure their campuses to ensure their students receive opportunities to interact with one another across different backgrounds and perspectives." Two concrete reforms are proposed. The first is random assignment of first year roommates. The second is to deprioritize the use of single speakers about political and social issues and to construct more debates about those subjects instead. As the authors note earlier, "To a striking degree, our campuses have come to be constructed around the isolated speaker rather than debate or exchange." Classes are usually taught by one professor, outside invitations go to speakers who just lecture, and

commencements highlight a speech to a captive audience.

These practices suggest to students that ideas are meant to be developed hermetically and then broadcast to the world rather than cultivated in an ongoing dialogue with others who might disagree or refine them . . . The bottom line then is that university leaders need to be more creative in seeking opportunities to model for our students' productive interactions across difference. . . . How can university leaders and faculty complain about how our students don't know how to debate or disagree effectively when we don't even try to reveal to them what it looks like?" (235-6)

Though it does not make the final four of the book's suggestions for reform, the book does recognize the problem of ideological imbalance on campus. According to research by Mitchell Langbert, Anthony J. Quain, and Daniel B. Klein, registered Democrats outnumber Republicans 35 to 1 on the Hopkins faculty, the second most imbalanced institution

1 David Randall, Christopher Welser, *The Irreproducibility Crisis of Modern Science: Causes, Consequences and the Road to Reform*, National Association of Scholars (April 2018).

in their sample, following only Brown University. Daniels' analysis that:

As educators, university faculty and administrators should take seriously any suggestion that student voices are being shut down in the classroom. That being said, evidence of liberal indoctrination is grossly overstated and focus on that topic is somewhat misguided.

We should be asking instead why so many disciplines suffer from a dearth of conservative faculty in the first place and what the consequences of that imbalance are. . . . If the professoriate continues to congregate on the political left, it shortchanges conservative and liberal students alike.

Conservative students need to feel that their campus is one that invites their views in the endless refinement of ideas through reason, both outside the classroom as well as within it. (226-227)

So what concrete steps should be taken? The book mentions a practice since 2013 at the University of Colorado, Boulder of inviting a "visiting scholar in conservative thought."

In what other environment would that "solution" not be viewed as tokenism?

Actually, Hopkins might be an ideal university to model balanced discussions. In 2017, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation gave the University \$150 million to fund and structure a broader campus dialogue on public policy. The money will be used to recreate the concept of the Athenian Agora which created a common space for people to coexist as citizens while engaging in political discourse and the exchange of ideas. The new Institute's mission is "[s]trengthening global democracy through powerful civic engagement and informed intensive dialogue." Two glass cubed buildings meant to symbolize citizen access to Hopkins's otherwise largely Georgian Homewood campus will house Institute activities and five faculty and eleven fellows were hired in 2021. Whether this well-intentioned enterprise will be able to balance its interest in global democracy with a concern for more focused American policy questions is too soon to say. Reforming the whole world on the model of the Athenian city-state is a formidable task.