

What Universities Owe Democracy, by Ronald J. Daniels, with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector

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In *What Universities Owe Democracy* (2021), Daniels stresses that universities play an indispensable role within modern democracies. But this role is often overlooked or narrowly conceived, even by universities themselves. In *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Ronald J. Daniels, the president of Johns Hopkins University, argues that—at a moment when liberal democracy is endangered, and more countries are heading towards autocracy than at any time in generations—it is critical for today’s colleges and universities to re-establish their place in democracy. Drawing upon fields as varied as political science, economics, history, and sociology, Daniels identifies four distinct functions of American higher education that are key to liberal democracy: social mobility, citizenship education, the stewardship of facts, and the cultivation of pluralistic, diverse communities. By examining these roles over time, Daniels explains where colleges and universities have faltered in their execution of these functions—and what they can do to help ensure that liberal democracy fulfils its promise of justice and equality for all.

The book develops its argument through four sections. The first considers what is wrong with liberal democracy, and why colleges and universities are essential to the flourishing of liberal democracy. The second examines how these institutions have come to acquire their role and gathered about them new functions and reimaged old ones over time. The third explores why they have faltered in their role and become distracted and distended by the exigencies of the moment over the past several decades. And finally, it considers whether they have a responsibility to act in defence of the liberal democratic

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experiment as institutions that enrich and are enriched by democracy and that are inextricably intertwined with democracy's values and ends.

In the first part of the book, Daniels argues that social mobility plays an essential role in the liberal democratic project and the collective belief in the prospect of sustaining this mobility is vital. He continuously argues that democracies draw their credibility and their resilience from an implicit covenant that anyone with enough grit and talent can move beyond the confines of the circumstances into which they were born. As income inequality and stratification have grown more acute and intergenerational mobility has stalled, this central tenet of the American Dream has become increasingly fragile. As criticised by Ambar Narayan and Roy Van der Weide (2018), low social mobility leads to unrealised human potential and misallocation of resources, as talented individuals from disadvantaged families are excluded from opportunities that favour those who were born with greater privilege rather than those with the greatest potential. Legacy preferences exacerbate this problem by eroding the credibility of colleges and universities and irreparably damaging the meritocratic ideal, the centrepiece of democratic faith, which the institutions of higher education ought to embody. They are, in a word, corrosive to the faith in social mobility and therefore the spirit that lights democracy itself.

In Chapter 2, Daniels rivets the attention on civic education. He argues that the citizen is at the heart of the democratic project, but the capacities of good citizenship are not innate. These capabilities must be cultivated and instilled through a carefully prescribed education. He also explores the contents of learning, the role of universities and the efficacy of democratic citizenship education. In addition, Daniels explains three impediments to the sustainability of a democratic education at universities: a lack of will on the part of leadership, the structure of the modern university, and the contest of ideas. To ensure that students encounter an education on democracy during their college years, the author calls for the need to establish a Democracy Requirement.

The third chapter considers universities as fact-producing and fact-checking institutions. Daniels notes that the once stable framework of facts and reliable knowledge that has supported our liberal democracies is showing signs of fracture. In responding to this, the responsibility of universities to step forward in defence of facts and expertise is greater than ever. He also casts doubt on the reliability of academic research from several perspectives: the government-university research compact drew more government scrutiny of (and attacks upon) its work, the massive influx of money coming from the private sector, and the "significant crisis" (p. 172) of reproducibility in science. In the rest of this chapter, Daniels turns to one broader idea that speaks directly to the reproducibility crisis while also speaking to, and even re-imagining, the relationship between a democratic public and the university as a fact-generating, fact-communicating, and fact-checking institution: open science. He firmly believes what is needed is an openness with guardrails.

In the last part (Chapter 4), Daniels turns towards questions of diversity and speech on campus. This chapter sketches the emergence of the pluralist impulse in colleges and universities: how it came to flourish over the years, why it has flagged, and what can be done as a response. Unlike the previous chapters of this book, which focus on admissions, curricula, and research, this one turns to the less formal social interactions, those moments of contact in campus life—which are sometimes spontaneous and serendipitous, and sometimes structured and deliberate—with the unfamiliar that have occurred on campuses for two centuries. As Daniels indicates, colleges and universities are microcosms of pluralistic and “multiethnic democracy” that have the capacity to model for students how to interact with one another across a vast spectrum of experiences to forge democratic compromise, consensus, and will. Compared to the past, our campuses today are far more diverse, yet we do not fully or adequately encourage the interactions and exchanges across differences that are foundational to a healthy democracy. The remainder of this chapter describes the scope of the pluralism challenge on campuses and what we can do about it.

This book explicitly reveals that American (in fact, it is not only American) democracy is in peril, and universities, as bulwarks of democracy, should make a difference in the struggle for liberal democracy. As educators, we should proactively deal with the dilemma of global democratic regression by taking full advantage of the function of education (especially higher education) to confront the misinformation and untruths in the digital age, rather than letting it take its course. The paths for reform proposed by Daniels could serve as specific guidance for educators to understand how to fully utilise the function of higher education in order to promote the development of freedom and democracy. While the idea is solid, there are limitations in the text. In the spirit of diversity, here are some considerations.

Daniels attempts to explore the changes in the democratic function of universities in different historical periods in *What Universities Owe Democracy*. While this is a topic that researchers in higher education have been focusing on, in our opinion, more important than this topic is the question, Are universities a category or a different category? When “university” is used as a synonym for some kind of social organisation, it gives people a feeling that the purpose and function of this kind of social organisation are completely consistent. Daniels acknowledges the array of college types. However, he usually uses elite universities as case studies in his book. In the era of the popularisation of higher education, there is not only one type of university that represents all universities, and the notion that all universities are positioned for one purpose will lead to a serious misunderstanding of universities, because the purposes and functions of universities are different due to their different positioning.

As Daniels demonstrates, universities have a certain democratic function. However, the relationship between universities and democracy is reciprocal. There is no university independent of society. The democracy of a university comes from the society in which it operates, and its democratic function is bound to be affected by the degree of social

democracy. As Dewey (1916) explained in *Democracy and Education*, since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education. In addition, Daniels analyses the four democratic functions of the university in *What Universities Owe Democracy*, but not all of these functions developed in concert with one another, and not all are operative in the same way—or to the same degree—for every single institution of higher education. When we discuss how different higher education institutions play their roles as bastions in democracies from a micro-operational perspective, various problems are easily encountered.

Finally, to promote social mobility, Daniels proposes to end traditional admissions and restore federal financial aid. However, as academics, we doubt that such measures would actually promote social mobility at all, and we believe Daniels despises the enormity of the task, because there are complex relationships among different stakeholders in higher education. How to coordinate the interests among all parties involved to make higher education functional is a major and sensitive obstacle that is yet to be discussed thoroughly. In fact, many elite universities in the United States are private universities, and their schools are not public in nature. Ending traditional preferences would indeed (allegedly) remove this injustice, but it would only make high college tuition out of reach for the poor. Even if the state increases financial aid, in the long run, more poor students may not necessarily be able to enter these elite universities, because social elites can always help their children enter better universities in other ways. For example, poor students cannot spend a lot of money to improve their test-taking skills and complete a bright application for admission.

Although *What Universities Owe Democracy* has certain limitations, the author's point of view is thought-provoking. Anyone interested in the interaction between universities and democracy, especially university presidents, chancellors, vice-chancellors and researchers will find this book worth reading. Only in the process of reading can we have a deeper understanding of the evolution of the democratic function of universities in the historical process and then infer which universities are currently undemocratic.

Note

The authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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