

DANIELS, R., SHREVE, G., & SPECTOR, P. (2021). *WHAT UNIVERSITIES OWE DEMOCRACY*. JOHN HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS.

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Universities are not merely bystander institutions to democracy but deeply implicated in, and essential for, its success. It is imperative in this moment ...universities...vindicate their obligations to this most precious and fragile form of self-governance.

Ronald Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, (Preface, x)

Democracy is in danger. We are at a crossroads. The house is burning and universities which serve as critical foundational pieces of democracy are in crisis and in the midst of a “democratic recession” (Daniels et al., 2021; Diamond, 2015; Myln, 2022; Tierney, 2021). These are but a few of the headlines that saturate our news feed on a daily basis. They speak of the watershed moment that we find ourselves and the motivation for the clarion call made in *What Universities Owe Democracy* by Daniels, Shreve, and Spector. Ronald Daniels, the president of John Hopkins University warns that liberal democracy is at inflection point and we can no longer ignore “... the gale winds of illiberalism” or the growing “...specter of autocrat power” in America and across the globe (p. 9–10).

In the introduction and throughout the book, the reader is reminded of the historic, pivotal, and essential role universities play in upholding and advancing liberal democracy. Building upon the ethos of John F. Kennedy, when he challenged a nation to rethink their relationship to government, Daniels challenges us to rethink the role of the university and writes that the most germane question at this moment is not, “How do we shape society to shape the university, but instead, How does the university best foster democracy in society?” (p. 10). *What Universities Owe Democracy* not only raises these questions, but provides a path forward by proposing universities be committed to a four-pronged approach unique to higher education’s ability to promote the benefits of liberal democracy: social mobility, citizenship education, creation of and stewardship of knowledge, and purposeful dialogue across difference.

In chapter 1 attention is given to better understanding the importance and role of social mobility. The ability for people to climb up or down the proverbial economic ladder has long been held as a core tenet and cornerstone of American democracy (p. 31). However, Daniels acknowledges that one of the current challenges of

liberal democracy is seeing the American Dream and equal opportunity become more and more elusive for many in our country (p. 34). Many simply cannot get access nor have the ability to climb the ladder to greater social mobility (p. 33). Instead, universities must move away from imbedded practices like legacy admissions and move more towards greater pathways for students, particularly low to middle income students to get access to meaningful educational opportunities while providing greater investments in higher education (p. 74, p. 85).

In chapter 2, this renewed investment in students and higher education should also be coupled with a reclaiming of teaching citizenship education. This reclaiming is in part due to a long move away from teaching civic education over the years (pp. 96–97). In *What Universities Owe Democracy*, we are reminded that “...how we educate and inspire our students to be citizens” is one of the core functions of higher education (p. 86). Daniels et al. provide a series of studies and research to demonstrate both the value and connection of citizenship education to upholding liberal democracy (p. 90).

In the process of raising the banner of citizenship education, there is time dedicated to the way service learning initiatives in higher education operate and contribute to these democratic outcomes. Daniels does not deny the contributions of these initiatives and even recognizes the value of service learning efforts and their growth across the country in part to organizations like Campus Compact (p. 115). However, he also serves both a reminder and word of caution to practitioners and supports of service learning efforts when he writes, “...universities have been far more enthusiastic about teaching students to engage the communities around them than to engage the democratic systems through which they self-govern” (p. 116). Instead of being viewed as an island of its own, civic and community engagement work should be more intentional and serve as a bridge to students learning of democratic norms and systems.

In chapter 3 the role of knowledge production is placed front and center. In *What Universities Owe Democracy*, COVID is used to remind us how the production and interpretation of facts can have real material consequences (p. 132). Daniels explains, “...a commitment to facts and truth is the terra firma of public discourse and reasoned decision-making in democratic life” (p. 134). For Daniels, facts are tied to greater acceptance of the methods used, the institutions dissemination of them, and the value of experts to our public understanding (p. 137). As a result, one of the ideas proposed was a move to a broader open science movement to facilitate greater openness and discussion both inside and outside higher education around knowledge production and calls it a “new knowledge ecosystem” that is more equitable and welcomes new voices, institutions, and perspectives (p. 185).

In chapter 4, we learn of the importance of having purposeful dialogue across difference. Daniels spends a considerable amount of time sharing the historical record and reflecting on his own challenges in creating what he calls “purposeful pluralism” (p. 196). He sees universities as places that were built to educate and foster debate and dialogue versus picking sides, constructing echo chambers, and refereeing disputes. This chapter more than any other reminds us of how hard it is to have a more inclusive and open society if we don’t have the skills, patience, and capacity to listen, discuss, debate, learn, and grow from one another. If students are not able to learn these skills while attending college and university, then where? How can we expect for liberal democracy to exist when there are fewer and fewer places for discussion, debate, deliberation, and dialogue across difference? Places where we understand different does not mean deficient.

Towards the end of *What Universities Owe Democracy*, we are reminded that democracy is fragile and it is not a spectator sport. Instead, it requires individuals and institutions to step into the arena and not simply sit in the bleachers or cheer on the sidelines. We have and continue to see first-hand the byproduct of political indifference, apathy, and agnosticism towards the growing wave of authoritarian sentiment here and abroad. Democracy cannot be taken for granted and it requires regular, constant, and intentional efforts to maintain its existence, sustainability, and growth (Daniels et al., 2021; Longo & Shaffer, 2019; Tierney, 2021). In *What Universities Owe Democracy*, one finds a great number of lessons learned from Daniels' decades of experience in higher education coupled with well-reasoned and articulated arguments about the unique role of universities to liberal democracy. In an environment where there is no shortage of political commentary discussing the dire nature of democracy, it is refreshing to see a book do more than provide a diagnosis, but a prescription for our current ills and a way forward.

References

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