

By: Mitch Daniels | December 13, 2021

How higher education can counter the dangerous weakening of American self-governance

Add to the long list of Johns Hopkins University's services to the nation the book its president, Ronald J. Daniels (as much as I wish I could claim a familial connection, there is none), recently published. It makes an important contribution to not one but two urgent and topical subjects: the weakening of American self-governance and the overall role of higher education in countering that dangerous trend.

That contribution begins with the book's title: "What Universities Owe Democracy." The occupational sector in which I have now worked for almost a decade is not, shall we say, much given to self-criticism. I have sat through innumerable speeches and panels about what a benighted, unappreciative society owes us – credit, respect and always, always, more money – but few, if any, that started with a question about reciprocal obligations and whether our institutions collectively might be failing to fulfill them.

Daniels devotes relatively little space to documenting the problem. He doesn't need to. Americans' ignorance about the

workings, the theory and the fundamental values inherent in their country's system of self-government have been painfully plain to see for decades now. The book's essence is a series of thoughtful and constructive suggestions for addressing the problem, to the extent that higher education can do so.

Those proposals start with an end to legacy preferences in admissions, to expand opportunities for first-generation and minority students. Daniels advocates reforms to make scientific research more open, transparent and verifiable, to begin repairing credibility damaged by conflicts of interest, foreign influence and too many overhyped, unreproducible and spurious research studies.

Closer to the core of the problem, he calls for "purposeful pluralism," a cluster of actions to "deliberately design campuses with an eye to engagement and dialogue." These include randomization of first-year roommate assignments, curricular changes that require broader exposure outside chosen major subjects, and other steps to move students

outside their "enclaves of familiarity."

He notes that universities are among those increasingly rare places where Americans of different backgrounds are sure to encounter one another, quoting John Stuart Mill: "It is hardly possible to overstate the value ... of placing human beings in contact with other persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar." To those who have "adopted a hands-off approach toward campus interaction" or, worse yet, enabled or encouraged self-segregation, Daniels says, "Universities were not built to referee; they were built to educate." Novel concept.

Between the goals of "engagement" and "dialogue," achieving the latter is probably the harder slog. As with civic illiteracy, the monotonous groupthink on the nation's campuses, and its frequent enforcement against dissidents, were long ago documented beyond debate. Daniels calls for adoption of the Chicago Principles of free expression, diversification of monolithically left-wing faculties and, interestingly, a

revival of the debating societies, sometimes called “little republics,” that he nostalgically reminds the reader were once at the center of university life. He hopes schools will “infuse debate into campus programming.”

One of his boldest proposals is that universities adopt a “democracy requirement” for graduation. Daniels believes that propounding, and living, the values of tolerance and individual dignity, while cultivating competencies such as basic historical knowledge and the skills of peaceful reasoning and persuasion, are now a central obligation of his school and all its counterparts. The heart of his case is that our universities, as much as any institution in society, should be exemplars of democratic behavior and values, “at the forefront of modeling a healthy, multiethnic democracy.” Brave as the book is, the author is too gentle about the degree to which today’s colleges fall short of this ideal.

He says they have been “passive” about promoting diversity of thought and open dialogue among differing opinions. But in countless cases, they have been not passive but complicit, allowing, or even colluding in, the squelching of departures from dogmatic fads of the day. Many have

been not models of healthy democracy but of its opposite. A first step back in paying what those universities “owe” would be Hippocratic, to stop making the problem worse.

Anyone with my job can benefit from Daniels’s wisdom, and high standards. Our university has no legacy preference, but we still have “curricular silos” and we do permit entering students to choose their roommates. We have implemented a civic literacy requirement, but not one as extensive as Daniels appears to have in mind. We enacted the Chicago Principles, but cannot claim to have truly “infused debate” into daily campus life. He has given us a lot to contemplate.

One hopes that Ronald Daniels’s sterling academic reputation, and that of his institution, leads to a wide readership among those in the sector to whom he addresses himself. But for those higher-ed leaders who do not get around to it, let’s hope they at least notice the title.