

## Higher Education for Democracy: The Role of the University in Civil Society

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# BOOK REVIEW

## HIGHER EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY: THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN CIVIL SOCIETY

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Tierney, William G. (Ed.) (2021). *Higher Education for Democracy: The Role of the University in Civil Society*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press. Pages: 299. Price: 38.15 CAD (paper), 142.50 CAD (hardcover).

In this book, the author discusses the essential role of higher education institutions in creating a more equitable and democratic future in civil society. The idea of democracy that the author is working from assumes that human rights are essential; that is, individuals are free to express their viewpoints and opinions without fear of reprisal. The academic's role in supporting and advancing democracy is explored through two research questions: What might academic institutions do to bolster and foster democracy and defeat fascism? What sorts of changes need to occur so that colleges and universities model the best practices of democratic life and aid in securing democracy in society? The author's main argument is that higher education institutions hold unique positions in the democratic state, with the potential to reframe discussions and structures in the larger state apparatus and to shape how individuals function and relate to one another in the society.

The book contains seven chapters, highlighting current issues threatening democracy in Los Angeles, New Delhi, and Hong Kong; and how a university should function to advance democracy. The first issue is the emergence of globalization and neoliberalism, which have created conditions for the demise of democracy: inequity, privatization, identity politics, attacks on academic freedom, and disregard of the public good. Specifically, inequity and privatization are greater, and the public good is more constrained today than in the past. While society is currently facing a democratic recession,

the voice of academe has been muted due to three crises that have hit universities worldwide, including loss of intellectual hegemony (*the university's intellectual role*), legitimacy (*how the society views the purpose of the university*), and institutional autonomy (*the university's right to make decisions*). According to the author, the university's intellectual hegemony has gone, a crisis of legitimacy exists, and the university's autonomy has been eroded.

The next critical issue is how the rise of technology and social media has made the protection of academic freedom harder, which has in turn made the role of universities as promoters of democracy and sites of resistance to fascism even more difficult. The idea of academic freedom in this book refers to the freedom of the professor to search for truth in and outside the classroom, which is crucial for academic excellence. The author justifies his concerns by citing evidence on threats to academic freedom in Hong Kong and limits of academic freedom in New Delhi, where the governments intervene in the universities' affairs and decision-making processes.

To outline how a university should function in the globalized knowledge economy to promote and enhance democracy, the author recommends that we first need to figure out the mission of the university as well as the identity of higher education. Accordingly, we need the universities to develop a language of community that honors differences and celebrates commonalities. Most

importantly, if academic freedom is viewed as the heart-beat of the institution, we need to think more deeply about what a modern higher education institution should do. The author suggests that higher education institutions should do a rethink about research, teaching, and service. For instance, in term of teaching, the university should develop a more protean model that does not simply equip students with the skills demanded by the labor market, but also offers ways to think about what it means to be a citizen and how to engage with one another in meaningful interactions. If the university only focuses on jobs for graduates, those graduates will be unable to analyze the situations that exist in the larger society.

The author also makes recommendations on specific academic competencies for the 21st century that universities and academics need to think through in order to best respond to fascism. These academic competencies include reaffirming the importance of global knowledge, embracing knowledge diffusion, interrogating racial and gender identities, and accepting the university as a locus of informed debate that stimulates actions. The book concludes by arguing as to what universities employing democracy as an organizing framework might exhibit, and offers a detailed framework for action for higher education institutions, students, and academics who are concerned about reinvigorating democracy. For example, universities should make equity a central value and goal, work across the globe for democratic engagement, encourage civil engagement – and prepare for the consequences, and demonstrate model behaviors. The proposed steps for action help to create conditions that enable actors to involve themselves in a politics of possibility and hope, rather than being put forward as a recipe in a cookbook.

For Canadian readers, the book helps us to understand the complexity in the role of higher education in advancing democracy, to analyze why we have been mute when we should have been vocal, and suggest how we might offer a more robust response to protect and advance democracy. The selection of the three locations of Los Angeles, New Delhi, and Hong Kong from both western and eastern countries to offer empirical evidence supporting the arguments in this book provides useful insights on how academia in different cultures and geo-political conditions experiences threats to academic freedom, autonomy, and democracy.

The key message from the book is that any of us who are working in a higher education setting have the

potential and unique ability to envision a better world and to figure out how to create the conditions to get there. When we struggle with these questions, we are representing the essence of the academics' search for truth, which is the academic freedom that higher education needs for excellence. Ultimately, the academics' job is to raise questions of society and point to directions that support democracy. This book, which was written with a concern about the future of democracy as the world again experiences the rise of fascism, is, therefore, useful for readers interested in higher education issues.