ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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Democracy and the purposes of higher education in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The authors argue that to understand the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the United States requires answering the question: academic freedom and institutional autonomy for what? To provide an effective answer, they discuss the core purposes of higher education in the US – education for democratic citizenship and the creation and advancement of knowledge for the common good, which involves developing and maintaining a democratic society. They then discuss the connection of academic freedom and institutional autonomy with academic and institutional responsibility and cite threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy from the early 20th century to today from government, higher education itself and the private sector. The authors emphasise that given the current development of illiberal democracy and attacks on science and knowledge itself, universities have an increased and pressing responsibility to contribute to both the education of informed democratic citizens and the advancement of knowledge to improve the human condition. Highlighting the point made in the 2019 Global Forum Declaration that "higher education must demonstrate openness, transparency, responsiveness and accountability as well as the will and ability to work with and contribute to the communities in which colleges and universities reside", they conclude that one of the best ways to practise academic freedom and institutional autonomy, as well as academic and institutional responsibility, is for universities to engage democratically with their local communities.

Keywords: democracy; citizenship; social responsibility; community involvement; academic freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the United States requires answering the question: academic freedom and institutional autonomy for what? To provide an effective answer to that question, we believe, it is necessary to first examine the core purposes of higher education in the US. These purposes are education for democratic citizenship and the creation of knowledge to advance the human condition, which significantly involves developing and maintaining a democratic society.

Education for citizenship is, in our estimation, the most important purpose of the university. Specifically, higher education must educate not only able, but also ethical, empathetic, engaged citizens of a democratic society. In 1947, as a 19-year-old freshman at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King Jr. authored an article for the campus newspaper on the "purpose of education" that powerfully captures this idea. "We must remember", he wrote, "that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate" (King 1947: 10).

As noted, the other central purpose of universities is to develop the knowledge needed to change the United States and the world for the better. In 1899, in a paper delivered to the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Jane Addams, the activist, feminist founder of Hull House settlement in Chicago's poverty-stricken immigrant 19th-ward neighbourhood, claimed that it was essential to "attempt to test the value of human knowledge by action" and "to apply knowledge to life" (Addams 1899/1985: 78).

Political Scientist Charles Anderson highlights the democratic purpose of US higher education in his description of the creation of the research university in the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

> The classic understanding was that the life of philosophy, of self-conscious reflection, was the highest of human attainments, and reserved to the very few. Even in modern times, it has normally been assumed that the capacity for reflective intelligence was rather unevenly distributed. The work of the university was taken to be essentially aristocratic. It dealt with the higher questions. It prepared the qualified for the *learned* professions. The university's role was rational speculation, and in the hierarchy of human interests this was thought to be quite remote from the concerns of everyday life.
>
> With deliberate defiance, those who created the American university (particularly the public university, though the commitment soon spread throughout the system) simply stood this idea of reason on its head. Now it was assumed that the widespread exercise of self-conscious, critical reason was essential to democracy. The truly remarkable belief arose that this system of government would flourish best if citizens would generally adopt the habits of thought hitherto supposed appropriate mainly for scholars and scientist. We vastly expanded access to higher education. We presumed it a general good, like transport, or power, part of the infrastructure of the civilization. (Anderson 1993: 7-8)

Given the current development of "illiberal democracy",[43] claims of "fake news" and "alternative facts", and attacks on science and knowledge itself, universities have an increased and pressing responsibility to contribute to both the education of informed democratic citizens and the advancement of knowledge for the continuous betterment of the human condition.

43. The term "illiberal democracy" was coined in 1997 by Fareed Zakaria in an article in *Foreign Affairs*. See Zakaria (1997). For a relatively recent discussion of the relevance of the concept to the United States, see his provocative article, Zakaria (2016).

THE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

As alluded to above, the history of colleges and universities in the United States strongly supports our claim that the democratic mission is, and should be, the primary mission for US higher education. The founding purpose of every colonial college except for the University of Pennsylvania was largely to educate ministers and religiously orthodox men capable of creating good communities built on religious denominational principles. Specifically, Harvard (Congregationalist), William and Mary (Anglican), Yale (Congregationalist), Princeton (Presbyterian), Columbia (Anglican), Brown (Baptist), Rutgers (Dutch Reformed) and Dartmouth (Congregationalist) were all created with religiously based service as a central purpose. Benjamin Franklin, on the other hand, founded Penn as a secular institution to educate students in a variety of fields. In 1749, envisioning the institution that would become the University of Pennsylvania, he wrote of developing in students "an *Inclination* join'd with an *Ability* to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family; which *Ability* … should indeed be the great *Aim* and *End* of all Learning" (Franklin 1749: 150-51).

As Penn Provost Wendell Pritchett stated in his speech at the 2019 Global Forum:

> Franklin founded Penn as a different kind of educational institution. It was completely new. Its mission was not simply to educate or create new knowledge. Those were part of the goal, of course – as they are at all universities. But Franklin was steadfast in his belief that the university had another, even higher calling: To form good citizens who would, in turn, go on to shape a new kind of political system: a Democratic Republic. To do this effectively, Franklin believed, required autonomy from government interference. Let me put it another way: That the advancement of knowledge for the improvement of humanity relied on producing students who would be creative, caring citizens of a democratic society. Education, yes … but education in the service of democracy. (Pritchett 2019)

Franklin's call to service is echoed in the founding documents of hundreds of private colleges established after the American Revolution, as well as in the speeches of many college presidents (Rudolph 1962). A similar blend of pragmatism and idealism found expression in the subsequent century in the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant colleges and universities whose purpose was to advance the mechanical and agricultural sciences, expand access to higher education, and cultivate citizenship. Using language typically found in documents from these institutions, the trustees of the Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College (now The Ohio State University) in 1873 stated that they intended not just to educate students as "farmers or mechanics, but as men, fitted by education and attainments for the greater usefulness and higher duties of citizenship" (Boyte and Kari 2000: 47). Later, the University of Wisconsin's "Wisconsin Idea" would broaden the concept of civic engagement from preparing graduates for service to their communities to developing institutions intended to solve significant, practical problems that affected citizens across the state (McCarthy 1912; Maxwell 1956: 147-48; Stark 1995-1996).

Urban universities at the turn of the century had a similar emphasis. For example, in 1876, Daniel Coit Gilman in his inaugural address as the first president of Johns

Hopkins, America's first modern research university, expressed the hope that universities would "make for less misery among the poor, less ignorance in the schools, less bigotry in the temple, less suffering in the hospital, less fraud in business, less folly in politics" (Long 1992: 184). Belief in the democratic purposes of the research university echoed throughout higher education at the turn of the 20th century. In 1908, Harvard's president Charles Eliot wrote:

> At bottom most of the American institutions of higher education are filled with the democratic spirit of serviceableness. Teachers and students alike are profoundly moved by the desire to serve the democratic community. This is a thoroughly democratic conception of their function. (Veysey 1970: 119)

Simply put, strengthening democracy at the expense of old social hierarchies served as the central mission for the development of the American research university, including both land-grant institutions and urban universities. Scholarship focused on producing a direct and positive change and "serving the democratic community" largely vanished, however, from universities after 1918. The First World War was the catalyst for a full-scale retreat from action-oriented, reformist social science. The brutality and horror of that conflict ended the buoyant optimism and faith in human progress and societal improvement that had marked much of the so-called Progressive Era in the United States of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Ross 1991).

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a substantive and public re-emergence of what might be termed engaged scholarship designed to contribute to democracy. The academic benefits of community engagement have been illustrated in practice – and the intellectual case for engagement effectively made by leading scholars and educators, including Ernest Boyer (1990) and Derek Bok (1990), as well as current university presidents such as Nancy Cantor of Rutgers University-Newark (2018), Eduardo Padrón of Miami Dade College[44] (2013) and Penn's President Amy Gutmann (1999, 2004). That case, simply stated, is that higher educational institutions would better fulfil their core academic functions, including advancing knowledge, teaching and learning, if they focused on improving conditions in their societies, including their local communities. More broadly, a burgeoning higher education democratic civic and community engagement movement has developed across the United States to better educate students for democratic citizenship and to improve schooling and the quality of life. Service-learning, engaged scholarship, community-based participatory research, volunteer projects and community economic development initiatives are some of the means that have been used to create mutually beneficial partnerships designed to make a positive difference in the community and on the campus.[45]

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44. Eduardo Padrón retired in August 2019.
45. Community-engaged work is happening at colleges and universities in small town and rural areas as well as urban centres in the United States. Campus Compact has a national membership of over 1 000 colleges and universities that are "committed to the public purpose of higher education. We build democracy through civic education and community development." See https://compact.org/who-we-are/, accessed 19 August 2019. For a more detailed overview of the civic and community engagement movement and its impact across higher education, see Chapter 5 in Benson et al. (2017).

ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Significant levels of institutional autonomy and academic freedom are necessary for intellectual creativity, free inquiry and progress. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy, moreover, are intertwined with *academic and institutional responsibility*. These ideas were central to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), an organisation formed in 1915 by leading Progressive Era academics John Dewey and Arthur O. Lovejoy, to ensure academic freedom for faculty members. The creation of the AAUP in 1915 was prompted by a number of instances of potential violations of academic freedom that the disciplinary societies were not equipped to address. Among AAUP's earliest cases was the University of Pennsylvania Trustees' summary firing of Scott Nearing, a professor in Penn's Wharton School, for his vehement criticism of child labour (AAUP 2015). In the wake of threats to democracy in Europe in the late 1920s and 1930s and the Depression in the US, as well as high-profile cases of attacks on academic freedom, the AAUP wrote its 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure to define faculty rights and responsibilities. This statement remains a guiding set of principles for academic freedom in the United States:

> Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. … It carries with it duties correlative with rights. (AAUP 1970:14)

A year earlier, in 1939, John Dewey wrote the article "Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us", in response to the growing threat of Nazism. Dewey described democracy as "a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature". He went on to write, "Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of differences of race, color, wealth or degree of culture are treason to the democratic way of life" (Dewey 1939: 229). For Dewey, core universal values are essential for a functioning democracy and for advancing the common good. Universities, in our view, must stand for these universal and democratic values to realise their core purposes of education for citizenship and creating knowledge to improve the human condition.

In her speech at the AAUP 2019 annual conference, Joan W. Scott, former chair of the AAUP's Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure and professor emerita at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, reiterated that academic freedom and institutional autonomy were needed to advance "the common good":

> Those of us looking to articulate a notion of the common good for the twenty-first century – and of course that notion will not be exactly the same as it was for the Progressives – need academic freedom to protect the space of our critical inquiry. In turn, the survival of the concept and practice of academic freedom depends on our ability to come up with that articulation. The common good will not survive – and for that matter neither will individuals survive – without medical knowledge, knowledge of climate change, knowledge of history, knowledge of how structures of discrimination work at the economic, social, political, and psychic levels to perpetuate

> inequalities of race, gender, sex, and religion. It is academic freedom that protects the production and dissemination of that knowledge. It is that knowledge that nourishes and advances the common good. The future of the common good and of academic freedom are bound up together; the one cannot survive without the other. (Scott 2019)

We should note that threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy come from many sources, including government, higher education itself and the private sector. For example, institutional autonomy also includes the freedom to pursue knowledge without undue influence from outside funding sources. With the rise of the so-called entrepreneurial university,[46] however, profit for the sake of profit too often appears to be the primary purpose of institutions of higher education. Needless to say, this has negative impacts on both research and education for the public good. For example, in the United States, the rush to cash in on breakthrough treatments has led to strong criticism of both academic medical centres and individual researchers for conflicts of interest that lead to both conscious and unconscious distortions in research findings and in institutional mission. A case in point is the denunciation of the administration and certain highly influential researchers at Memorial Sloan Kettering (a leading academic medical centre in New York City) by many of the institution's faculty members. To quote from a widely read article in *The New York Times*:

> Hundreds of doctors packed an auditorium at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center on Oct. 1, deeply angered by revelations that the hospital's top medical officer and other leaders had cultivated lucrative relationships with for-profit companies.
>
> One by one, they stood up to challenge the stewardship of their beloved institution, often to emotional applause. Some speakers accused their leaders of letting the quest to make more money undermine the hospital's mission…
>
> The concern of ethicists and health experts is that a bias in favor of industry can unduly influence scientific research and medical treatments and remove a valuable check on soaring drug prices. (Thomas and Ornstein 2018)

The commercialisation of universities also results in education for profit, not virtue; students as consumers, not producers of knowledge; academics as individual superstars, not members of a community of scholars. All of these developments contribute to an overemphasis on institutional competition for wealth and status and have a devastating impact on the values and ambitions of students (Bok 2003). When institutions openly pursue commercialisation, their behaviour legitimises and reinforces the pursuit of economic self-interest by students and amplifies the widespread sense that they are in college exclusively to gain career-related skills and credentials. Student idealism and civic engagement are strongly diminished when students see their universities abandon academic values and scholarly pursuits to function as competitive, profit-making corporations. Commercialism and the development of the entrepreneurial university, simply put, foster an

46. Although definitions vary, the concept of the entrepreneurial university grew out of the commodification and commercialisation that higher education frequently encourages, and the increased impact of the marketplace and the profit-making motive on university operations and goals. See Slaughter and Leslie (1997) and Clark (1998). For a more recent discussion that highlights the lack of definitional agreement, see OECD (2012).

environment in which higher education is seen as – and increasingly becomes – a private benefit, not a public good.

GLOBAL FORUM ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY, AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY DECLARATION

The interconnection of academic freedom and institutional autonomy with academic and institutional responsibility is captured in the Global Forum on Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, and the Future of Democracy Declaration (2019) adopted by the 2019 Global Forum participants. For example, the declaration states in paragraph 2:

> Higher education can only fulfil its mission if faculty, staff and students enjoy academic freedom and institutions are autonomous; principles laid out in the Magna Charta Universitatum as well as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are essential to furthering the quality of learning, teaching, and research, including artistic creative practice – quality understood as observing and developing the standards of academic disciplines and also quality as the contribution of higher education to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Higher education must demonstrate openness, transparency, responsiveness and accountability as well as the will and ability to work with and contribute to the communities in which colleges and universities reside.

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy, therefore, are mediated rights that come with responsibilities. As stated above, working with and contributing to their local communities is essential if colleges and universities are to function as responsible institutions. In our judgment, it is also an institutional responsibility for universities to work in *democratic partnership* with their community, demonstrating "openness, transparency, responsiveness and accountability". Reflecting on the work we have done at the Penn's Netter Center for Community Partnerships with the University of Pennsylvania's local community of West Philadelphia over the past 30 years, we believe there are certain core democratic principles that should be incorporated into partnerships.[47]

DEMOCRACY AND OPENNESS, TRANSPARENCY, RESPONSIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The principles of democratic purpose, process and product, when put into practice, can powerfully contribute to successful university–community partnerships and university responsiveness. We summarised these principles, identified by

47. To be more specific, all three of the authors have senior administrative positions at the Netter Center, which was founded in 1992 to serve as the university's primary vehicle for advancing civic and community engagement at Penn. Ira Harkavy serves as founding director, Joann Weeks is associate director and Rita Hodges is assistant director. The Netter Center develops and helps implement democratic, mutually transformative, place-based partnerships between Penn and West Philadelphia that advance research, teaching, learning, practice and service and improve the quality of life on campus and in the community. See www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/about-center/our-mission., accessed 6 August 2019.

higher education leaders (including Harkavy, a co-author of this chapter) at a 2004 conference :

- Purpose: An abiding democratic and civic purpose is the rightly placed goal if higher education is to truly contribute to the public good.
- Process: The higher education institution and the community, as well as members of both communities, should treat each other as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. The relationship itself and welfare of the various partners should be the preeminent value, not developing a specified program or completing a research project. These are the types of collaborations that tend to lead to a relationship of genuine respect and trust, and most benefit the partners and society.
- Product: A successful partnership also strives to make a positive difference for all partners–this is the democratic product. Contributing to the well-being of people in the community (both now and in the future) through structural community improvement should be a central goal of a truly democratic partnership for the public good. Research, teaching, learning, and service should also be strengthened as a result of a successful partnership. Indeed, working with the community to improve the quality of life in the community may be one of the best ways to improve the quality of life and learning within a higher education institution. (Harkavy and Hartley 2009).

For the purpose of this chapter, we highlight the issue of democratic process. Our argument, simply put, is that an inclusive epistemology that involves the knowledge possessed "on the ground" by community members is required for the effective solution of locally manifested universal problems such as poverty, health inequities, environmental sustainability and inadequate, unequal education. This epistemology expands the definition of expertise and knowing to include other voices – those not necessarily steeped in professional credentials or academic knowledge, but in lived experience of the conditions and actualities under examination (Ahlstrom-Vij, Kappel and Pedersen 2013; Giampietro 2006). What is called for is a movement away from a narrow definition of "expert" to a "community of experts", a broadening of context to include indigenous place-based knowledge (Cantor and Englot 2013: 121). Community members with that knowledge must also be actively involved, from the definition of the problem through development and implementation of solutions (Whyte, Greenwood and Lazes 1989).

In describing the set of assumptions involved in participatory action research, a form of research particularly appropriate for place-based academic-community partnerships, William Foote Whyte argues that "the standard model does not represent the one and only way to advance scientific knowledge". Instead, he encourages:

> a research strategy that maximizes the possibility of encountering creative surprises [which] are most likely to occur if we get out of our academic morass and seek to work with practitioners whose knowledge and experience is quite different from our own. (Whyte 1989: 383-384)

Furthermore, there is a significant difference between researching as a detached observer versus as an active participant, whose work genuinely matters to the local population. As participants, researchers are much more likely to develop trusting relationships with community members, which is a requisite for having access to insider knowledge (Webb et al. 2000).

DEMOCRACY AND CONTRIBUTING TO THE COMMUNITIES IN WHICH UNIVERSITIES RESIDE

One of the best ways to practise academic freedom and institutional autonomy as well as academic and institutional responsibility is to engage locally. Local participatory democracy is, in our judgment, necessary for the development of a democratic culture that goes beyond the crucial act of voting and extends to all areas of life. In 1929 in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey famously wrote, "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (Dewey 1927/1954: 213). Dewey, however, did not appreciate the powerful role that higher education could and should play in building "the neighborly community", as well as the benefits to universities themselves that would result from local engagement (Benson, Harkavy and Puckett 2007). In 1999, 70 years after Dewey coined his far-reaching proposition, Shirley Strum Kenney, president of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, succinctly captured the societal and institutional benefits of community engagement: "To be a great university we must be a great local university" (Ellin 1999: B10).

The benefits of a local community focus for colleges and universities are manifold. Ongoing, continuous interaction is facilitated through work in an easily accessible location. Relationships of trust, so essential for effective partnerships and effective learning, are also built through day-to-day work on problems and issues of mutual concern. In addition, the local community provides a convenient setting in which service-learning courses, community-based research courses and related courses in different disciplines can work together on a complex problem to produce substantive results. Sustained local partnerships of this kind foster the civic development of university students while advancing their academic learning and knowledge. The local community is also a democratic real-world learning site in which community members, academics and students can pragmatically determine whether the work is making a real difference and whether both the neighbourhood and the institution are better as a result of common efforts (Benson et al. 2017: 147-148).

As colleges and universities work collaboratively with their neighbours on locally manifested universal problems, we believe they will be better able to advance knowledge, learning and democracy (Bergan, Harkavy and Munck 2019). In so doing, they will also satisfy the critical performance test proposed in 1994 by the president of the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, William R. Greiner – namely, that "the great universities of the twenty-first century will be judged by their ability to help solve our most urgent social problems" (Greiner 1994: 12).

CONCLUSION

We conclude this chapter by briefly summarising our central points. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are inextricably linked to the purposes of higher education in the United States: education for democratic citizenship and the advancement of knowledge for the common good, which involves developing and maintaining a good democratic society. Higher education should, indeed must, stand for core universal values, including tolerance, diversity and inclusivity,

open inquiry, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy as well as academic and institutional responsibility are necessary for universities to realise these values in practice. We have highlighted this point made in the Global Forum on Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, and the Future of Democracy Declaration (2019): "Higher education must demonstrate openness, transparency, responsiveness and accountability as well as the will and ability to work with and contribute to the communities in which colleges and universities reside". In our view, genuine participatory partnerships with the local community is a highly effective strategy for universities to contribute to the common good and fulfil the unrealised democratic promise of US higher education.[48]

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48. The importance of local engagement is recognised outside the US. The Council of Europe, in collaboration with the US Anchors Institutions Task Force (AITF), held conferences in Rome (2017), Dublin (2018) and Strasbourg (2019) to discuss creating a European entity inspired by AITF. At the Strasbourg meeting participants from across Europe agreed to form a small task force that would include a representative from AITF to consider organising a network that would focus on exchanging experiences and advocacy. The AITF, formed in 2009, is a growing network of over 900 leaders promoting the engagement of anchor institutions – including colleges, universities, hospitals, community foundations, libraries, arts institutions and other anchors – in community and economic development. The AITF is designed to develop and disseminate knowledge and function as an advocacy and movement building organisation to create and advance democratic, mutually beneficial anchor institution–community partnerships. See www.margainc.com/aitf, accessed 6 August 2019.

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