Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy

Reviewed by **Mark E. Butt**

College presidents are being fired; students are being silenced; and political division is ripe across America. Within the realm of higher education, college campuses are emerging as critical battlegrounds in ongoing cultural and political conflict across the country. Yet universities are at the intersection of fostering communities and spaces of belonging while also introducing students to ideas and concepts with which they ideologically diverge. University of Pennsylvania Professor Sigal R. Ben-Porath, in a thought-provoking and nuanced exploration, confronts political polarization, free speech, its role in fostering democracy, and how institutions of higher education can promote a culture of constructive argument (Barnett 2022). Ben-Porath's primary objective is to unveil the intricate role that universities play in American society, illustrating how they can serve as models for free speech that actively contribute to the cultivation of democratic ideals and values. In her 2023 work *Cancel Wars*, she contends that the intensifying debates surrounding "cancel culture," "safe spaces," and free speech within academic settings reflect a more extensive democratic erosion transpiring in America but that there are also remedies in plain sight. College and university administrators are to pay close attention to Ben-Porath's guidance.

Summary

Ben-Porath sequences her work effectively to promote understanding for all readers, regardless of expertise in this subject matter. First, in chapter one, she identifies the current context in which institutions are situated, which is polarized and ideologically divergent. In a moment and era marked by increasing polarization and eroding trust across divides, Ben-Porath argues that universities are uniquely positioned to address these challenges. In fact, they're central to it.

In chapter two, Ben-Porath contends that the democratic project of universities is both an intellectual and a social endeavor. She notes the importance of this duality. While previously there was an almost exclusive understanding that institutions of higher edu-

cation were predominantly academic and focused on truth, expertise, and public trust in research, Ben-Porath unveils that the "cultivation of connections" amongst community members is a precondition for institutional success (Ben-Porath 2023, 58). There exists more duality than a binary between these efforts—she notes they're "mutually reinforcing" (Ben-Porath 2023, 58). She posits that networks of trust and shared knowledge emerge when traditional mechanisms of inquiry—such as the exchange of ideas, expertise, and research—are complemented and elevated by social elements, including friendship, discussions across differences, and civic engagement (Ben-Porath 2023).

Chapter three delves into the intricate relationship between harm and speech. Ben-Porath advocates for clear and morally-accurate terminology, pushing back against the recent tendency to equate harmful speech with violence. While acknowledging the potential harm of speech in depriving individuals of safe and supportive environments, she emphasizes the need to carefully distinguish harmful speech from wrongdoing (Ben-Porath 2023). The criteria she proposes for responding to complaints of harmful speech involve an exploration of the speaker's intentions, identity, audience, and pedagogical justification for the speech (Ben-Porath 2023).

Chapters four and five explore the pragmatic aspects of free speech, and inclusion, and divides the exploration by schooling apparatus: K–12 and then higher education, respectively. According to Ben-Porath, a significant portion of the conflicts observed on campuses may stem from the lack of preparation among students for an environment that encourages free inquiry, as they rarely encounter such dynamics in their previous educational experiences (Ben-Porath 2023, 110). There exists a culture gap. The reluctance, or inability, of K–12 teachers to introduce controversial political topics into the classroom and the restrictions placed on student speech by court rulings, ostensibly to maintain an undisturbed learning environment, contribute significantly to this issue (Ben-Porath 2023). This aspect is an integral component of the challenge at hand. There exists a significant gap between boundaries in high schools and boundaries on an open-ex- pression college campus. The question then becomes, how might K–12 better prepare students for higher education going forward? The solution and responsibility are exposed as not only belonging to that of higher education but rather the entire apparatus of schooling in America.

Analysis

Free Speech, Expression and Subjective Harm

Ben-Porath employs a nuanced perspective to address the legitimate claims of harm asserted by those targeted by hate speech, acknowledging the complexity inherent in navigating these contentious issues. Her focus extends to delineating the boundaries of acceptable speech and illuminating the disproportionate impact that hate speech inflicts on marginalized groups. By doing so, she underscores the responsibility of academic institutions to respond proactively to *extreme speech*, fostering constructive dialogues across diverse perspectives. The significance of establishing such dialogues extends beyond collegiate gates, offering profound implications for robust political discourse at scale. The manuscript argues that leveraging the truth, expertise, and reliable sources of information rooted in academic work can serve as a potent tool against the corrosion of truth in society, ultimately combating the phenomenon of truth decay. In navigating these often-competing principles, universities strive to maintain an environment conducive to robust debate and intellectual exploration while fostering inclusivity and welcoming diversity within the campus community (Ben-Porath 2023).

Notably, Ben-Porath argues for the consideration of context when considering harms, offensive speech, or similar: who is speaking; who is the audience; and what is the justification? (Ben-Porath 2023). She expands significantly and successfully on this specific tenet throughout chapter three and devotes at minimum six pages to its discussion. Ben-Porath argues context matters. This lies in stark contrast to media reports that consideration of context is problematic or at least misunderstood, weaponized, or underval-

ued (Scott 2024). She also carefully notes the distinctions and wide variations in harm, as understood on campuses. Chapter three is arguably one of the most essential sections of the book and can even stand on its own.

One of the central tenets is Ben-Porath's call for a shared understanding pertaining to rules of civil discourse on college campuses (Ben-Porath 2023). She carefully invokes the University of Chicago's principles of free expression open discourse and guiding text. She argues preconditions are necessary, however, for civil discourse to thrive. She notes that shared community ground rules foster and successfully develop critical habits of democratic engagement and citizenry as well as consistency across the adjudication of cases (141). She also notes the role of individual "testimony" over blame (71). Finally, community inclusion is posited as enhancing free speech by inviting diverse perspectives, while free speech itself becomes a means of inclusion through open and honest discussions on challenging issues (Ben-Porath 2023).

The Role of Universities

Sigal Ben-Porath's nuanced exploration provides a meticulous and largely successful attempt to affirm higher education's role in society. At its core, her argument is firmly rooted in the democratic role she envisions for universities within the broader societal context. They are tools of a successful democracy. Emphatically stating that "colleges are laboratories in which democracy is learned, practiced, and enhanced," Ben-Porath underscores the pivotal role of higher education institutions in shaping democratic values and principles (Ben-Porath 2023, 1).

The dual functions ascribed to universities in the book are pivotal in understanding their societal role. Firstly, they are acknowledged as knowledge key producers and disseminators, offering the shared knowledge essential for building policy and navigating governance in a complex world. This role is imperative for the successful functioning of politics, which, as Ben-Porath contends, requires a commonly understood reality (Ben-Porath 2023). Secondly, universities are envisioned as idea and knowledge hubs

for fostering "democratic habits" of mind and practice, fostering interactions that build trust and mutual understanding across diverse community members (Ben-Porath 2023, 110). Ben-Porath would agree with Barnett (2022) as they both recognize higher education communities should empower members to develop *democratic habits of being,* which will benefit both the individual and society broadly. She reminds readers that universities are social enterprises and have a responsibility to establish, cultivate, and grow relationships beyond their gates—not to simply drive research and innovation. In fact, they must engage socially to fulfill their roles in society successfully.

Ways Forward

Ben-Porath's insights for harmonizing and nuancing free speech and inclusion are abundant. Her book advocates for the establishment of university norms and practices that "rehumanize ideological opponents" and focus on reconciliation over punishment (Ben-Porath 2023, 86). It also urges "dialogue and connection across difference" (Ben-Porath 2023, 123). Interestingly, she points to the importance of local interactions, and promoting person-to-person and individualized connections. She argues the community and *local role* matters significantly. The final chapters scrutinize the practical aspects of the issue and address concepts of disruption, neutrality, and making public statements. Notable, she attributes much of the campus conflict to students› lack of preparation for an atmosphere of free inquiry. Ben-Porath›s concrete recommendations offer valuable guidance for governing boards, students, faculty, staff, and administrators. These include fostering collaboration across identity groups, incentivizing social events, employing «free speech observers» to ensure speech rights are honored, and encouraging deliberate yet guided controversy in the classroom (Ben-Porath 2023, 92–151).

Conclusion

As we find ourselves grappling with a world mired in distrust, disinformation, and polarization, *Cancel Wars* emerges as a crucial resource for navigating this crisis. Ben-Porath compellingly argues that the

university should serve as a beacon in these troubling times—a facilitator of knowledge, speech, inclusion, and trust. Her practical recommendations, while logically sound and reflective, underscore the urgency of curating a better public image for universities and actively resisting the politicization of research.

For educators and school leaders, Ben-Porath's work becomes a compelling resource, as it highlights the transformative potential of universities in revitalizing democracy. Her approach is even-handed and successful in its nuance. By expanding and disseminating knowledge, academic institutions can actively contribute to rebuilding civic trust, a crucial element in the American democratic fabric. The book advocates for harnessing the collaborative construction of knowledge occurring within schools, colleges, and universities to counteract the challenges posed by truth decay and contribute to the collective strengthening of democratic principles. The book thus stands as a highly-practical and theoretically-informative tool for college and university administrators. But, as many universities now employ a first-year reading project for incoming new students, *Cancel Wars* would make for a compelling choice for them as well.

Direct Admissions Report

Reviewed by **Jonathan Lord**

The Minnesota Office of Higher Education's *Direct Admissions Report*[1] delves into the processes associated with direct admissions in the state of Minnesota. The authors—Aaron Salasek, Coordinator of Direct Admissions, Meredith Fergus, Director of Research, Wendy Robinson, Assistant Commissioner for Programs, Policy, and Grants, and Sally Krager, Research Assistant, focus on reviewing program design; implementation challenges and recommendations; outcomes; and the feasibility of scaling the program to all public high schools.

The significance of a report like this lies in its potential to impact future student access and the sustainability of direct admissions programs to reach more students annually. Specifically, this work focuses on eight milestones, each with a specific threshold to achieve. Over the course of the last academic year, there were several milestones that exceeded their threshold, including a focus on increasing diverse student populations and students with need, an increase in the number of participating high schools, and a commitment to provide information early to the students and their families.

Direct admissions models offer high school seniors ease of access to schools of their choice within their home state, promoting increased consumer value and community reinvestment. This model offers valuable insights into strategies, policy applicability, and program accessibility that can be replicated across other states. As a higher education administrator in Idaho specifically involved with Next Steps Idaho,[2] I can attest to experience and challenges faced by families, schools, and policymakers during implementation of a statewide program for direct admissions. While the work done in Idaho is on a much smaller scale, the Idaho State Board of Education has worked collectively with the Idaho State Department of Education to build an "Apply Idaho" application that allows all twelfth-grade students to apply and select the schools of their choice in one simple application.

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[1] *See* <ohe.state.mn.us/Documents/Direct%20Admissions/ OHE_Direct%20Admissions%20Report_2024_ADA.pdf>.

[2] *See* <nextsteps.idaho.gov/direct-admissions>.

Summary

The Minnesota Office of Higher Education (MOHE) emphasizes that every high school graduate is college material. The "Direct Admissions Minnesota" program aims to mitigate self-selection bias in college admissions practices and reduce equity gaps in college enrollment through four strategies: promoting a college-going culture; facilitating connections between learners, their families, schools, and colleges; emphasizing the value of financial aid and assisting with scholarship applications; and establishing pathways from certificates to bachelor's degrees.

MOHE has devised seven steps for implementing the direct admissions program at high schools, including a yearly opt-in process for both high schools and colleges and universities. This process entails completing mandatory agreements, notifying families about participation, reviewing students' grades to assign admission tiers, and students selecting institutions and responding to notifications, which are securely transmitted to the Office of Higher Education (OHE). OHE compiles and sends data to colleges, who then contact students to proceed with the admissions process.

In the pilot year (2022–23), 46 high schools from 28 counties participated, with seven additional high schools opting to join the subsequent year. The 39 participating high schools enrolled approximately 6,989 students, with nearly half identifying as Black, Indigenous, and students of color, and 23 percent eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Concurrently, 50 colleges and universities participated. Significant expansion occurred in the 2023–24 academic year, necessitating coordination among various stakeholders.

OHE issued a call for participation to high schools in March 2023, assuring no cost for involvement and offering additional funding support. Colleges and universities were invited to waive application fees and directly admit students based on specified academic tiers. The program's organizational structure fosters collaborative efforts among advisory workgroups, districts, high schools, and higher education institutions. OHE plays a significant role in orchestrating program coordination, with partner groups aligned toward common goals.

Challenges include fidelity, communication, technology, and program administration, with the burden particularly high on counselors. Timely feedback provision and clear communication are crucial for program success. The technological requirements for executing the process across varied learning management systems pose significant challenges. Specific data points are available in the report, many of which show great signs of future health within the admissions system pipeline. A few examples include student gender, which revealed fewer men were choosing to participate; student race or ethnicity, which suggested a higher proportionality of white students compared to other races; and whether the student filed a FAFSA, which increases significantly when in the direct admissions program.

Analysis and Evaluation

The OHE evaluated several outcomes and provided statistical breakdowns of student types and their participation ratios in direct admissions in Minnesota. Despite acknowledged challenges, the direct admissions program remains optimistic about its potential for improvement through collaborative efforts from various stakeholders. Recommendations include expanding the number of participating high schools, working with schools earlier in the year, maximizing existing SIS technology usage, standardizing communication timelines, developing new marketing content, establishing communities of practice, partnering with community-based college-access organizations, enhancing outreach efforts, and collaborating with the Minnesota Department of Education on college awareness initiatives. These measures aim to enhance the program's effectiveness and reach, ensuring continued growth and success.

This report presents its findings in an accessible manner, with clear headings depicting data and its understanding to aid the state in improving processes. It is worth investigating the provided data further and considering demographics and future possibilities to reach more schools and learners. As noted earlier in this work, the authors believe the challenges they currently face include fidelity, communication, technol-

ogy, and program administration. For example, while implementation costs are low, the burden on counselors is high. It is imperative to provide timely feedback and clear communication to learners. The technological requirements to execute the process across varied learning management systems pose significant challenges. And most challenging to the stakeholders is the need to grow participation by underrepresented groups. It is apparent from this work that the great equalizer will be in allowing higher education institutions to meet students at whatever level they are at and help them succeed.

Conclusion

Overall, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education's report on direct admissions offers a compelling exploration of student access and retention across the entire state system. It provides valuable insights into scalable direct admissions programs, focusing on program initiation and partnership. The program recognizes that there are areas to grow, which include a deeper understanding of the high school go-on rates and the ensuing immediate college enrollment in and out of state. A consideration of diverse perspectives and potential equity issues within the program would strengthen the analysis and recommendations provided by the authors. A deeper study may reveal strategies for attracting more learners to consider college earlier and ways to effectively reach families. Given the newness of the project and its implications for the future, I wholeheartedly support any higher education leader give this article a read.

References

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About the Author

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Dr. Lord is an active contributor to the field, with notable presentations at conferences such as RCCA, AACRAO, NISOD, and NACEP. He holds a doctorate in higher education leadership from Idaho State University.