

Prince, G. S., Jr. (2008). *Teach Them to Challenge Authority: Educating for Healthy Societies*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Review by Beth Walter Honadle

This book's provocative title is reminiscent of Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book* or Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*. Those books, written a generation ago as manuals for rebellion, advocated a confrontational approach to change. *Teach Them to Challenge Authority* is anything but a radical, anti-establishment screed. In purpose and tone, this book is rather an impassioned argument for an activist, engaged academy. The author, Gregory S. Prince, Jr., describes the book as equal parts memoir and argument. As memoir, it draws on his education and experiences in private institutions—from being a student at St. Albans School in Washington, DC, through college at Yale and Dartmouth, and from his decade and a half as president of Hampshire College.

The book is organized in three sections. Part I boldly presents two contrasting views of education. On the one hand are what Prince calls “the neutralists,” those who argue that university professors should not advocate positions in the classroom. According to Prince, if “Neutral University” had a mission statement it would read, “[T]he true purpose of education is to create a context where all issues are debated openly and where all ideas can be expressed. Believing that authority and power tend to suppress openness, Neutral University has as a core principle that the university and its administrative officers will remain neutral on all critical debates and issues in order to create the greatest possible openness” (p. 119). The neutralist camp includes Robert Bork (conservative jurist and scholar), Stephen Balch (National Association of Scholars), and David Horowitz (Students for Academic Freedom).

On the other hand are what Prince calls “the activists,” representing a markedly different vision of the role of a liberal education. Prince makes the case for faculty expressing opinions on topics that are not related to their disciplines, such as a professor of physics criticizing President George W. Bush's Iraq policies. According to Prince, the neutralists equate advocacy with indoctrination and the suppression of independent thinking. Prince's counterargument is that “on the contrary, . . . advocacy [is] an appropriate, even central feature of a liberal education” (p. 28).

Part I (called “Two Views of Education”) also provides a recent history of thought through the lens of a college administrator. Early in the book, Prince goes into considerable detail about the philosophy and writing of Robert Bork, one of the leading intellectuals on the conservative side of the “culture wars,” or conflict between conservative and liberal values. Prince states, “Bork’s thesis is straightforward. American civilization is in decline because modern liberalism and its powerful ally, American education, have continually led the younger generation astray” (p. 12). Part I goes on to recount testimony at legislative hearings in Pennsylvania on academic freedom. Prince does a good job of summarizing the opposition’s brief in favor of neutrality—and then proceeds to attack it point by point.

Part II (called “Mirrors for America”) profiles five institutions from different parts of the world that represent the activist model. Prince offers these examples of educational institutions that have adapted an American form of education with the hope of transforming their societies. They include the University of Natal (South Africa), the European Humanities University (Lithuania), the Asian University for Women (Bangladesh), Singapore Management University, and the American University in Bulgaria. He uses each institutional case to make a different point about the virtues of an engaged university (e.g., modeling the behavior we expect from students, teaching critical thinking, and challenging authority). Some of the examples are so new that Prince can merely speculate about their success. The Asian University for Women was “slated to open in 2008,” the year Prince published the book. Nevertheless, Prince develops this case of a university with a mission “to provide a liberal education to any qualified woman” (p. 105). In the confident language characteristic of *Teach Them to Challenge Authority*, Prince writes, “It is hard to imagine another mission that could challenge more conventions or so many authorities or that could accomplish so much in trying to build healthy communities” (p. 105).

In Part III (called “The Engaged University”) Prince uses the first two chapters to raise questions about “What is enough?” With the first two-thirds of the book devoted to building a case for how the engaged university is supposed to better society, it was refreshing to read Prince’s thoughtful assessment of whether an engaged university is sufficiently engaged. Prince concedes that this is a difficult and subjective question, but does not allow this difficulty to deter him from addressing the topic head-on.¹ Prince calls these the “are-you-doing-enough” questions” (p. 168) and

appropriately equivocates. From the point of view of resources and opportunities, he thought his institution, Hampshire College, was doing enough. However, when he examined its activities in terms of needs and what ought to be done, his answer to “Are you doing enough?” was “No.”

The final chapter of the book is a call for institutions to listen to students. This recommendation follows from earlier chapters in which Prince drew on his personal practices and experiences as an administrator. He frequently talked about his routine breakfasts with students at Hampshire. He related a time when he objected to a meeting of institution presidents about why students do not vote that did not include students’ voices, so he convened a meeting of students (two from each institution at the original conference) at Hampshire to develop and present their views. One of the most amusing (and instructive) stories Prince told was about how he worked with the minuscule Republican club at Hampshire College to deal with their posters’ being ripped down by students who did not agree with their opinions. Prince expressed great satisfaction at the group’s success in advancing views that were contrary to his own. In another extended vignette, Prince showed leadership and courage in chastising his own students for piggybacking on a patriotic rally after September 11, 2001, to espouse anti-imperialist views, and burn an American flag. He devoted three pages of the book to quoting an open letter he had written on the occasion to explain his position that their tactics were wrongheaded.

All in all, this is a well-written, interesting book that leaves the reader with a clear understanding of the author’s point of view. Prince has much to offer those who want to move their institutions toward more engagement, even if he sometimes is heavily prescriptive. It is clear that Prince has spent decades thinking about the subject. The book is an attempt to pull his experiences, arguments, and principles together into a coherent volume. Prince has developed boilerplate text that can be used for discussions, and for drafting mission statements. He is a firm believer that mission statements matter, even if they are only ideals and not always realized fully. Examples of Prince’s template guidelines include his four principles about the purpose of education; his “Principles of Discourse” (e.g., tenets dealing with truth, responsibility, listening, criticism, civility); and his “Bill of Rights for the Engaged University” (complete with several “whereas” clauses, lists of student rights and responsibilities, and a list of responsibilities for universities).

I once read a good rule for writing book reviews that said the reviewer should judge a book based on the author’s intentions, not

based on the book the reviewer wished the author had written. This book certainly fulfills the author's stated purpose. Readers, however, may find Prince's style somewhat pretentious and sanctimonious. A substantive weakness of the book is that the author never really explains what he means by "a healthy society," a concept that Prince seems to take as self-evident. And some readers may be distracted by the many references to "tertiary education" (rather than the more common "higher education") and other arcane terms. Still, taken as a whole, the book comes across as fair-minded and sincere.

Teach Them to Challenge Authority offers a cogent, thoughtful treatise on the value of engaged education in terms of critical thinking skills and other benefits. The book provides a strong argument against what the author sees as paternalistic "neutral education" that does not trust students to draw their own conclusions and avoid being indoctrinated. In short, this book should be read and discussed by students, faculty, and administrators who are seeking more than buzzwords about engagement and want to dig deeper into the rationale for an engaged, activist academy populated by different types of institutions. Prince is not suggesting that all institutions be the same; on the contrary, his vision is for a diversity of institutions representing different perspectives, and he allows for some neutralist institutions.

Endnote

1. The approach of examining *what* institutions do, *how well* they do it, and *how much* they do conforms to the book review author's own work on capacity-building (*Honadle, 1981*), which explains some of its methodological appeal to this reviewer.

Reference

Honadle, B. W. (1981). A capacity-building framework: A search for concept and purpose. *Public Administration Review*, 41(5), 575–580.

About the Reviewer

Beth Walter Honadle is a professor of planning in the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning at the University of Cincinnati. Her research interests include community and economic development, regionalism, public policy, intergovernmental relations, public finance, workforce development, and capacity building. She earned her bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and her master's degree in economics and public administration, and her Ph.D. in public administration from Syracuse University.