Problems and Promise

On higher education in America

by Richard L. Morrill

Derek Bok's *Higher Education in America* is imposing both in its comprehensiveness and in the balance and depth of its arguments. Rather than offering a taxonomic catalog of the uniquely diverse components of American higher learning, Bok provides a compendium of analysis and evaluation of colleges' and universities' performance. He often focuses on the criticisms and the increasingly contentious discussions about the cost and the quality of higher education that have taken hold in the media and among students of the field and policymakers.

*Higher Education in America* will be of special interest and value to decisionmakers at all levels in colleges and universities—trustees, administrators, and the faculty—as well as to the higher-education policy community in government, think-tanks, the media, and private foundations. Bok's 21 years as president of a leading research university shape the background of his assumptions and the foreground of his concerns; on several occasions he offers engaging examples of how those Harvard experiences influenced his thinking and prompted decisions of his own.

His concerns are familiar: he examines claims that research has driven out good teaching, tenure is outmoded, professors have a liberal political bias, and collegial governance is often dysfunctional. He also explores the beliefs that student attainment in the United States (as measured by both degree-completion and the quality of learning) is in relative decline on a global scale, and that the cost of college is reaching unsustainable levels in many institutions. He examines whether graduate education adequately prepares future faculty for teaching, and—in a sector often not analyzed elsewhere, but a special interest during his Harvard presidency—whether professional schools in law, medicine, and business are meeting their educational, professional, and ethical responsibilities. He also explores at length whether industry sponsorship of research has compromised core academic values, and if educational institutions' endless preoccupation with money, competition, and prestige has become obsessive and counterproductive. The issues are not new, but the way Bok makes his case is distinctively valuable because of the range, nature, and tenor of his arguments.

Although Bok has serious concerns about many aspects of the enterprise of contemporary higher education, he does not believe that it should "re-invent" itself, or that it has failed to serve the public constructively for the past several decades. The vast expansion of educational opportunity in the United States and the transformation, within two generations, of a system serving a narrow slice of the population into mass higher education are, he reiterates, unparalleled achievements. American research in science and other fields still leads the world by many indicators—including the numerous publications by American scholars cited in other studies around the globe. Despite rising competition, international students still flock to the United States. American prosperity has been driven by research and technological discoveries that often start in university laboratories and classrooms and migrate into business and government. While acknowledging that institutional ed-
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Educational change is slow and cumbersome, Bok claims that individuals and programs have shown impressive abilities to adapt rapidly, not only by adopting new fields of study, innovative research methods and discoveries, new forms of technology, and active and collaborative learning, but also by expanding dramatically the inclusiveness of their faculty and student bodies.

Regarding most of the other headline critiques, Bok expresses a variety of misgivings but sees more reason for affirmation than reproach:

- Drawing on diverse data, and applying his characteristic effort to balance points of view, he concludes, for instance, that faculty members engaged in research still spend most of their time during a regular term focused on teaching.
- Perhaps surprising some readers, he argues that tenure is not required to protect academic freedom, since there are other ways to accomplish that essential objective—but argues that even though tenure has its problems (especially without a mandatory retirement age), it is the best option among otherwise unappealing or unproven ways to attract and keep creative, talented people in the professoriate.
- There are signs of liberal political bias in some departments, according to some student surveys—but most units, he reports, are primarily interested in attracting the most accomplished scholars, without regard to politics. If not, academic leaders should seek to address the issue and, above all, find ways to discourage any form of indoctrination of students.
- Price increases in tuition cannot be sustained indefinitely, to be sure, but higher education alone cannot be blamed for the problem, he states: its salaries are driven by competitive markets for talent, and the large sums spent for student financial aid are an expensive obligation of American democracy. The inability of most state governments to fund their institutions at prior levels has fueled sharp tuition increases in the public sector, even as reversals in the economy and stagnation in real average family incomes have contributed decisively to the problem of affordability.

Alongside those arguments, Bok frequently proves himself a realist who justifies many of the decisions colleges and universities have made to improve their programs—and raise their prices in response to market demands. He unapolo-
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getically suggests, for instance, that improving students’ housing, dining, and recreational facilities is no different than what society at large has done constantly in other contexts. If parents and students expect and press for new facilities and programs, how can institutions respond otherwise in a highly competitive admissions market?

Even so, Bok proceeds persuasively from a profound belief in the values of academic life, the generative source for many of his conclusions. He celebrates the creativity and resourcefulness of innovative research, and wonders how to create more systematically the conditions that bring it about. He argues that the pillars of modern societies and economies rest heavily on the research and human capital developed by higher education through its fundamental values of professional autonomy and peer review, freedom of thought and expression, and the disinterested discovery and communication of knowledge. Such values cannot be managed by hierarchies of authority; they require a free play of ideas and discoveries evaluated by peers. He is fearful that these fragile values can be easily compromised, so universities should be even more assertive in assuring, for instance, that commercial interests do not compromise the independence of the research they fund.

Despite most faculties’ reluctance to focus on gathering evidence of effective student learning, Bok believes professors will eventually find ways to use periodic and flexible methods of assessment to improve teaching. His continuous affirmation of this goal resonates all the more coming from the former president of an iconic research university. He believes faculty will change on this issue and others whenever “they are persuaded that existing practices conflict with the principles and responsibilities that help define their professional identity and that shape the aspirations that give meaning to their lives.” Harvard faculty in the sciences, he notes twice, quickly focused on strategies to improve their students’ writing when data showed the science concentrators had not progressed as much as students in the social sciences and the humanities.

Despite the serious challenges, Bok believes that by drawing on the powerful and distinctive values of the academy, and its entrepreneurial spirit, higher educa-
tion can once again change and improve substantially during the next generation. Countering recent opinions by distinguished peers about the limitations of sharing university governance with the faculty in confronting disruptive change, Bok affirms that leadership by presidents, boards, and top academic officers can draw out the best possibilities from the faculty for serving authentic academic purposes and responding effectively.

The conclusions on governance and decisionmaking seem less persuasive than many of Bok’s other analyses. The issue is not about abandoning the principles of faculty involvement, nor about the need for presidential leadership. On the contrary, higher education needs more effective ways of drawing faculty members into the work of collaborative, strategic decisionmaking and academic leadership, into taking more responsibility for the common curriculum, the improvement of student learning, and the good of the whole organization. Given the depth of the challenges Bok describes, change may have to come sooner and run deeper than is possible by following the fragmented and laborious ways most campuses now make decisions.

The issue for Derek Bok in Higher Education in America is not that colleges and universities should be free from criticism or the expectation that they must improve, sometimes significantly. What he finds most regrettable is that critiques of a particular weakness or problem are generalized to define the whole educational enterprise, often without evidence, often without conceding that higher education has no real control over many of its circumstances: drastic turns in the economy, sharp declines in state support or volatility in endowment returns, even the readiness of students themselves to take on the demands of a college education.

In making his case as he addresses issues across the spectrum of higher education, he presents differentiated points of view and reasoned arguments based on diverse sources of evidence. Bok includes, for example, various sets and tables of data about educational trends, including evidence of the uneven progress that most students make during the college years. He is a contrarian in an era of blogs, sound-bites, one-liners, and the politicized and ideological simplification of complex questions. Far more irrec弥补 than polemical, he often plays out competing arguments at some length as he moves toward a conclusion, developing and testing his own thinking in the process. In sum, Bok provides us with a comprehensive and balanced analysis that is not easy to find in other higher education literature.

At times, his balancing phrases—“on the one hand…on the other” is a rhetorical signature—leave the reader wondering exactly where the author wants to take the issue. For example, when Bok argues that it is instinctively troubling to see administrative costs and personnel increasing more rapidly than academic budgets and staffs, he quickly follows with counterpoints about why those costs may be defensible—before returning to his misgivings about the trend. At other times he demonstrates so much skepticism about an issue, such as the incoherence of much of the contemporary college curriculum, that he fails to persuasively restore the balance needed for determining ways to make improvements.

Obviously, any observer can find many things on any campus to praise or blame, from creative and influential scholarship to some truly trivial pursuits, from countless faculty who invest themselves tirelessly in the success of their students, to some who would rather be home tending their gardens (and sometimes are). So it goes in the mixed levels of performance in every known organization. In his unusually comprehensive analysis, Bok provides a persuasive, distinctive model for how to interpret and respond to ambiguities like these in academic organizations: get the best available information and reason rigorously about the findings by considering all sides of the argument; then develop a realistic appraisal of the possibilities for change; and finally, set goals for improvement in terms of the deepest academic values of open inquiry and disinterested discovery, along with the commitment to offer an education that is demonstrably effective in helping students fulfill their best ethical, intellectual, and human possibilities. That remains the promise of higher education in America.

Richard L. Morrill, chancellor of the University of Richmond, recently concluded his service as president of the Teagle Foundation, which encourages change in higher education to improve undergraduate learning in the arts and sciences. He was previously president at Richmond, and of Centre College and Salem College.

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**Chapter & Verse**

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

**Alfred King seeks** a source for: “We have no moral right to decide on a basis of opinion, that which can be determined as a matter of fact.”

**Norman Holly writes,** “In the 1950s, when only men were admitted to Harvard, students published a risqué ditty, ‘Don’t Send Your Daughter to Harvard.’ (It was available at the Coop.) Does anyone know the lyrics and the tune?”

**“the importance of every hour... as it passes”** (September-October). Eliot Kieval, the first of several readers to identify what is known as “Jane Austen’s Third Prayer,” provided a link to a 1994 article by the late Bruce Stovell, Ph.D. ’71, about the prayers, published by the Jane Austen Society of North America: www.jasna.org/persuasions/printed/

number16/stovel.htm. Daniel Rosenberg noted that the texts appear in R. W. Chapman’s edition of Austen’s minor works; Katie Schubert supplied an online link to the prayer at http://www.leithart.com/archives/002984.php. The exact quotation, in context, is: “Another day is now gone, and added to those, for which we were before accountable. Teach us an almighty father, to consider this solemn truth, as we should do, that we may feel the importance of every day, and every hour as it passes, and earnestly strive to make a better use of what thy goodness may yet bestow on us, than we have done of the time past.”

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