

REFLECTIONS ON THE MOST IMPORTANT
CHALLENGES FACING OUR COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES BY AN EXPERIENCED,
DISCERNING, AND AFFECTIONATE CRITIC:

A REVIEW OF DEREK BOK'S *HIGHER
EDUCATION IN AMERICA*

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About a quarter century ago, American higher education lost the golden glow that had enveloped it during the decades after World War II. No one wanted to repeal the wondrous growth of student enrollment and scientific research that had blossomed during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, but suddenly colleges and universities faced fierce critics and troubling accusations. Several high profile books, starting with Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*,¹ took higher education severely to task for what Bloom and others perceived as the soul-impoverishing relativism of the curriculum and the left-leaning "political correctness" of the faculty.² The most telling criticisms concerned undergraduate education, an activity that professors allegedly neglected in favor of their often-useless research, with the result that many college and university graduates were ill-prepared for life and work.³ Adding injury to the insults, state governments everywhere began reducing their funding for higher education, and alas they are reduc-

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1. ALLAN BLOOM, *THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND: HOW HIGHER EDUCATION HAS FAILED DEMOCRACY AND IMPOVERISHED THE SOULS OF TODAY'S STUDENTS* (1987).

2. DEREK BOK, *HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA* 369 (2013).

3. See BLOOM, *supra* note 2; see also MARTIN ANDERSON, *IMPOSTERS IN THE TEMPLE* (1992); DINESH D'SOUZA, *ILLIBERAL EDUCATION: THE POLITICS OF RACE AND SEX ON CAMPUS* (1991); ROBERT KIMBALL, *TENURED RADICALS: HOW POLITICS HAS CORRUPTED OUR HIGHER EDUCATION* (1990); PAGE SMITH, *KILLING THE SPIRIT: HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA* (1990).

ing it still.⁴ Together, these developments marked a turning point where the tides of popular and political opinion shifted against higher education and hurled it toward the defensive posture it has mostly occupied to the present day.

None of this adversity has prevented America's colleges and universities from continuing to excel in their missions of education, research, and service to society. They are now graduating more and more diverse students than ever before; setting a standard for the world in making discoveries that advance human health and economic productivity; and contributing in myriad ways to the well-being of their communities and the nation.⁵ College and university faculty members are utilizing the latest technologies in teaching and research, creating new courses and programs to meet fresh challenges and opportunities, and doing all this with fewer and fewer real dollars from taxpayers.

But the shock of criticism and the withdrawal of support, first administered to colleges and universities a quarter of a century ago, have left their marks. For one thing, a vast literature of articles and books on higher education has appeared, some of it directed toward popular audiences, some of it directed toward scholarly audiences. Many authors have pushed back against the Bloom-era criticisms, but at least as many have deepened and extended the faultfinding.⁶ Both the federal and state governments have responded by regulating higher education to a far greater extent than in the past, and in many substantive areas, the courts have gotten into the act as well. Budget cutting by the states has led to significant tuition increases, which, in turn, have discouraged attendance by some students, driven others deeply into debt, and opened up a whole new arena for berating colleges and universities.

At the present time, there is no firm consensus on higher education in America. Its institutions remain both highly popular and highly suspect, and there is little agreement on the problems or the solutions. Recently, in-

4. Karin Fischer & Jack Stripling, *25 Years of Declining State Support for Public Colleges*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Mar. 3, 2014), <http://chronicle.com/article/An-Era-of-Neglect/145045/>. *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, a research newsletter published monthly in Oskaloosa, IA, regularly reports comprehensive longitudinal data on state support for higher education as well as information on many other subjects related to colleges and universities. POSTSECONDARY EDUC. OPPORTUNITY, <http://www.postsecondary.org/> (last visited Apr. 6, 2014).

5. For an authoritative and inspiring account of many of these achievements, see JONATHAN R. COLE, *THE GREAT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY: ITS RISE TO PREEMINENCE, ITS INDISPENSABLE NATIONAL ROLE, WHY IT MUST BE PROTECTED* (2009).

6. See, e.g., CHALLENGES FACING HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE MILLENNIUM (Werner Z. Hirsch & Luc E. Weber eds., 1999) (a volume of insightful essays by higher education luminaries). The footnotes in the book under review here provide a remarkable compilation of the diverse scholarly literature on American higher education today. See BOK, *supra* note 2.

deed, a new generation of criticisms has emerged, with special emphasis upon the costliness and ineffectiveness of undergraduate education.⁷ One characteristic of the 1990s and early 2000s was the difficulty that college and university presidents (including the writer of this review) experienced in conveying, publicly and compellingly, the wider purposes of their enterprise. The preceding generation of presidents (one of whom is the author of the book under review) did so with greater success.⁸

At this uncertain juncture, Derek Bok's study, titled *Higher Education in America*, presents in a single, erudite volume a clear-eyed account of virtually all of the vulnerabilities, issues, and problems facing colleges and universities today.⁹ Bok sustains some of the criticisms and dismisses others, but what principally characterizes his book is a fair and balanced analysis of every subject he addresses. Drawing to an extent upon decades of personal experience, and drawing even more so upon the evidence unearthed in the hundreds of studies he cites, Bok has written the definitive book on American higher education for our era. Many of the challenges he recounts have been caused, at least in part, by external forces beyond the campus, but Bok focuses relentlessly on what colleges and universities can do for themselves to solve these problems.¹⁰ The audiences he seeks to reach include all the constituencies who have a stake in higher education, but he confesses "a special concern for readers who have chosen to enter that particular vineyard known as 'academic administration.'"¹¹ Anyone who is even thinking about joining that company should read this book—carefully.

For anyone familiar with American higher education—and certainly any reader of this journal—Derek Bok needs little introduction. The president of Harvard for two tumultuous, triumphant decades spanning from 1971 until 1991, where he had previously served as a professor of law and as the dean of the law school, Bok has gone on to an astonishingly productive, post-presidential career as the author of several influential works on higher education, as well as another quick stint as Harvard's president.¹² Now, he

7. Two of the best examples are RICHARD ARUM & JOSIPA ROKSA, *ACADEMICALLY ADRIFT: LIMITED LEARNING ON COLLEGES CAMPUSES* (2011) and JEFFREY J. SELINGO, *COLLEGE (UN)BOUND: THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR STUDENTS* (2013).

8. Jeffrey Selingo, *As Colleges Evolve, So Must Their Presidents*, *CHRON. HIGHER EDUC.* (Mar. 4, 2013), <https://chronicle.com/article/As-Colleges-Evolve-So-Must/137635/>.

9. BOK, *supra* note 2.

10. *Id.* at 23. By contrast, JONATHAN R. COLE in *THE GREAT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY* focuses on what external entities, mainly the federal and state governments, should do, or stop doing, to help colleges and universities. See COLE, *supra* note 5. Both perspectives are, of course, entirely valid.

11. BOK, *supra* note 2, at 4.

12. See, e.g., DEREK BOK, *UNIVERSITIES IN THE MARKETPLACE: THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION* (2003); DEREK BOK, *OUR UNDERACHIEVING COL-*

has written what may or may not be his capstone book, a study that is as capacious as its title, as judicious as was Bok's presidential leadership, and as truly learned as its author. For all that, Bok wears his Harvard identity lightly. *Higher Education in America* has a lot to say about elite, private institutions, but it offers just as much, maybe more, about flagship state universities and comprehensive publics. Bok doesn't completely ignore community colleges or for-profit institutions, but they receive far less attention overall than do the other sectors of higher education. In a couple of well-chosen spots, Bok tells a Harvard story that helps to make a specific point, without arrogance, and at least once he pokes a bit of fun at himself as a former Harvard president. But that's about it; this is not a book about the particular institution that Bok knows best.

Rather, it is a comprehensive account of our colleges and universities, starting with the essential features of the American system of higher education—its strengths and weaknesses, its purposes and goals, and the ways in which the institutions are governed. Bok then turns to the core missions of colleges and universities and devotes most of his book to undergraduate education (his pivotal subject); Ph.D. graduate education; professional education in medicine, law, and business; and research. In each section, Bok concentrates on the problems, the contested areas, the issues that warrant a careful examination—and, in each, he provides exactly that. There are wonderfully lucid mini-essays on practically every subject in which readers will be interested. Just to name a few, they include the following: the value of a college education;¹³ how to improve the relationships between states and their public universities;¹⁴ degree completion lengths and attrition rates in PhD programs;¹⁵ changes in the hospital environment that are transforming medical education;¹⁶ the liberal bias of the faculty;¹⁷ and the characteristics of intellectual communities that encourage genuinely creative thought.¹⁸

Despite its breadth and judiciousness, *Higher Education in America* renders tough judgments and touts strongly held views. There are many things about our colleges and universities that Bok admires. He credits higher education with meeting momentous challenges in the second half of the twentieth century: transitioning from elite to mass education, expanding re-

LEGES: A CANDID LOOK AT HOW MUCH STUDENTS LEARN AND WHY THEY SHOULD BE LEARNING MORE (2006); WILLIAM G. BOWEN & DEREK BOK, *THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER: LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF CONSIDERING RACE IN COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS* (1998).

13. See BOK, *supra* note 2, at 82–87.

14. *Id.* at 100–01.

15. *Id.* at 231–38.

16. *Id.* at 264–69.

17. *Id.* at 369–76.

18. *Id.* at 376.

search to address national needs, speeding the translation of laboratory discoveries into useful products, and preparing students for careers in countless emerging fields.¹⁹ Bok deeply admires the core values of higher education, including freedom of thought and expression, disinterested search for truth, respectfulness toward every member of the academic community, and the spirit of invention and experimentation that pervades our colleges and universities—although he laments some fraying of those values today and believes they need conscious protection (most particularly when colleges and universities accept corporate support for research). Bok is generally positive about faculty and students, about college and university leadership (even trustees and presidents), and about the potential of new technologies to improve both teaching and research.

But Bok has equally strong reservations about other features of the higher education system: the vast disparity of resources between the “haves” and “have-nots” among our institutions, the pernicious rankings (he singles out *U.S. News & World Report* again and again) that drive colleges and universities to try to achieve goals that are measureable but ultimately spurious, mission creep and the needless accretion of new programs and activities, big-time intercollegiate athletics, and the relentless engagement in profit-seeking activities by institutions of all kinds. Readers who want an esteemed expert to exonerate colleges and universities of all the charges against them need not bother with Bok.

At the heart of his book is education, and, above all, teaching and learning for undergraduates. Indeed, Bok’s deepest concerns lie in this area, as did the complaints of higher education’s critics a quarter of a century ago. The difference is that Bok’s worries are based on his experience, discernment, and affection for higher education—and have nothing to do with the politics of the professoriate. Two problems concern Bok the most. Put crudely, they are about *quantity* and *quality*—about the sheer number of young people who graduate from colleges and universities and about how much they learn while they are there.²⁰ “Thirty years ago,” Bok writes, “the United States ranked near the top of all nations in the percentage of young people graduating from college [Since then], however[,] graduation rates in most advanced countries have surged, while in America they have stood still.”²¹ Those left behind are overwhelmingly low- and moderate-income Americans, who, if they go to college at all, are likely to attend inadequately resourced, comprehensive colleges and universities, community colleges, or for-profits, while the children of wealthy Americans occupy most of the seats at the selective institutions, both public and private. These privileged students graduate from college in far greater proportions

19. *Id.* at 201.

20. *Id.* at 79–80.

21. *Id.* at 87.

than do their less fortunate counterparts, and in so doing they gain access to loftier careers and higher incomes as well as better health and longer lives. American higher education is now perpetuating, and even deepening, the nation's social and economic inequalities—with gloomy consequences for future economic prosperity and for the fulfillment of individual hopes and dreams.²²

Bok attributes these sobering realities chiefly to rising college and university costs, which, in turn, owe a great deal to the decline of state support for higher education. Characteristically, however, Bok devotes most of his attention not to blaming somebody else but to suggesting constructive steps that institutions themselves can take to elevate the rates of attendance and graduation by economically disadvantaged students. He brings to his discussion almost every conceivable remedy: better coordination between high schools and colleges and universities; targeted outreach to low-income students, especially by selective institutions; reduction of college and university costs; enhancement of need-based financial aid; supportive interventions for struggling students; and the application of new technologies to teaching. Bok's analysis of college and university costs is particularly exemplary; sadly, however, he is not optimistic that they can be greatly reduced. Nor, despite his extreme concern about the need to improve educational attainment, is he cheerful about the likely near-term outcomes: "By any honest calculation," Bok writes, "the chances of success by 2020 are problematic at best."²³ Who, he asks, will educate and graduate more non-affluent students? Maybe no one.²⁴

Bok's second principal commitment is to improve student learning and to redress what he calls the "weakened state" of undergraduate education.²⁵ He questions whether the prevailing curriculum—with its three components of general education, electives, and the major—is well suited for enabling students to achieve either the broad purposes of a liberal education or the narrower aims of vocational preparation. That curriculum, after all, typically reflects "a political accommodation" among different groups of faculty members, "rather than a carefully considered framework for achiev-

22. *Id.* at 81–144. For a corresponding analysis, with particular reference to minority students, see ANTHONY P. CARNEVALE & JEFF STROHL, *SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL: HOW HIGHER EDUCATION REINFORCES THE INTERGENERATIONAL REPRODUCTION OF WHITE RACIAL PRIVILEGE* (2013). Suzanne Mettler offers similar observations, but places the blame squarely upon politics and government: "The demise of opportunity through higher education is, fundamentally, a political failure." Suzanne Mettler, *College, the Great Unelevator, The Opinion Pages*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 1, 2014), http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/01/college-the-great-unleveler/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

23. BOK, *supra* note 2, at 118.

24. *Id.* at 98–165.

25. *Id.* at 182.

ing the lengthy list of generally accepted educational goals.”²⁶ To judge from research that Bok cites, moreover, most college and university students make only modest progress at gaining proficiency in critical thinking, written communication, or mathematics. This should not be surprising. Over the course of the last several decades, the amount of academic work assigned to undergraduates has declined; they now study much less than they used to—and get higher grades!²⁷

The answer, Bok believes, lies in better teaching. By this he means less lecturing and more classroom discussion, higher expectations for students and greater demands upon them, more assignments and experiences that require students’ active engagement, and continuous assessment of what they are really learning. That’s a tall order, to be sure, but here Bok is remarkably hopeful. Many elements essential to the reformation of teaching and learning are in place; others can be mustered over time. Thanks to “a flourishing process of educational research,” there is a “large and growing literature” on effective instruction and an accumulation of evidence “that current teaching methods are not accomplishing the results that professors assume are taking place.”²⁸ Bok sets forth a hypothetical, but believable, multi-stage process through which faculty, well-supported by college and university administrators, could review and reform the existing curriculum and adopt meaningful changes in methods of instruction. He predicts “that major improvements in teaching will eventually take place”²⁹ because of the growing evidence on their behalf, the availability of better measures of student learning, and continuing pressures, both on and beyond the campus, for accountability and reform.³⁰

When Bok moves beyond undergraduate education to his briefer but still authoritative appraisals of graduate and professional education, he maintains his urgent concern with student learning. America’s top universities, he observes, do very well in training Ph.D. students as researchers, but are far less effective in preparing them to teach. “Few graduate students,” he writes, “learn about the implications of cognitive research for teaching and learning. . . . Even fewer become informed about the ethical obligations of instructors.”³¹ Ever the practical reformer, Bok proposes a worthy scenario in which responsibility for such training would be shared by a student’s graduate institution and by the college or university that first appoints that student to an academic position.³² Each of Bok’s informed, perceptive

26. *Id.* at 176.

27. *Id.* at 166–86.

28. *Id.* at 202–04.

29. *Id.* at 214.

30. *Id.* at 186–219.

31. *Id.* at 239.

32. *Id.* at 238–46. See also Derek Bok, *We Must Prepare Ph.D. Students for the Complicated Art of Teaching*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Nov. 11, 2013),

chapters on professional education in medicine, law, and business includes an incisive discussion of what and how to teach.³³ No reader of *Higher Education in America* can escape Bok's most essential point, and no one who aspires to leadership within our colleges and universities should fail to ponder it: the greatest challenge facing higher education today is not securing dollars or gaining reputation or even hiring faculty; it is *improving student learning*.

In exactly that spirit, Bok's discussion of research takes up the question (originally launched as an accusation by critics of Allan Bloom's era) of whether the time-consuming demands of research have led faculty to neglect their teaching. Drawing upon extensive studies of that question, Bok gives an answer that is at once familiar and unexpected. No, he says; voluminous evidence about the relationship between research and teaching provides little support for the view that research undermines the quality of undergraduate education—or that it improves it, either. The main impact of the one upon the other, he observes, is that an emphasis on research affects “the willingness of faculty members to entertain proposals for fundamental changes in curriculum and teaching methods . . . [and leaves them] less open to making substantial reforms in undergraduate education.”³⁴ Bok does not present this as an argument for doing less research, only as another challenge to be faced if student learning is to receive the attention it needs and deserves.³⁵

Even a book as fine and far-reaching as Bok's cannot cover every topic in exhaustive detail, and some of its judgments and interpretations will inevitably fail to satisfy every reader. There are two important subjects about which I wish Bok had written more extensively and one to which I wish he had brought an added vantage point. These subjects are, respectively, adjuncts, athletics, and affirmative action.

Bok mentions part-time adjunct instructors a half-dozen times, and in a couple of footnotes, he cites the literature exploring the effectiveness of adjuncts as teachers and their impact on dropout rates, grade inflation, and the amount of attention students receive from faculty. Elsewhere, he notes that at many institutions adjuncts bear most of the responsibility for teaching the required basic courses in writing, math, and languages, while in another context, Bok observes that the presence of “massive numbers of part-time instructors” proves that institutions have the “flexibility to respond to changing instructional priorities.”³⁶ Limited, no doubt, by the paucity of research on adjuncts, Bok perhaps felt he carried this topic as far as he

<http://chronicle.com/article/We-Must-Prepare-PhD-Students/142893/>.

33. BOK, *supra* note 2, at 262–64, 273–82, 291–305.

34. *Id.* at 335.

35. *Id.* at 328–37.

36. *Id.* at 362.

could. But in light of the large and growing share of undergraduate instruction borne by such faculty, and hence the direct relevance of their teaching effectiveness to student learning, greater attention to part-timers might have been in order. The hiring of more and more adjuncts represents, for better or worse, one of the most effective ways in which public colleges and universities have controlled costs, and the growing classroom presence of part-time teachers will inescapably influence the capacity of those institutions to achieve the educational goals Bok has set forth.³⁷

Bok also brings up intercollegiate athletics from time to time, and his references whet the appetite for more extensive coverage of the topic. All the devilish features of big-time sports are here: the admissions preference given to academically underqualified athletes, the losses of millions of dollars a year, the exploitation of football and basketball players, the amount of presidential time and attention taken up by athletics, and, through it all, the ceaseless “shabby compromises and petty scandals.”³⁸ Bok briefly contemplates the option of eliminating intercollegiate athletics as a cost-cutting measure, but he quickly acknowledges that a firestorm of opposition from alumni, trustees, politicians, and students would doom any such proposal and, probably with it, any president who suggested such a thing. Just as in the case of adjuncts, Bok may feel he said everything he has to say about athletics. But given the prominence of big-time sports at so many institutions and in light of the obvious challenges they pose to student learning—both for athletes themselves and for those who watch and cheer for them—this reader hoped for a more sustained treatment of athletics.³⁹

Lastly, Bok’s discussion of racial preferences in admissions decisions, commonly termed affirmative action, is missing an important dimension. Readers familiar with his pathbreaking study titled *The Shape of the River* (written with William G. Bowen) will know that Bok supports affirmative action and believes it to be effective.⁴⁰ In the present volume, as is his custom, Bok offers a judiciously balanced analysis of the subject. He explains both sides of the debate, acknowledges that “no amount of evidence is likely to resolve the argument over racial preferences,” and concludes with the sly observation that if (or, more likely, *when*) the United States Supreme Court abolishes affirmative action, selective colleges and universities “will find some constitutionally permissible substitute” that allows them to con-

37. *Id.* at 115, 187, 334, 359, 407. For recent evidence of growing political interest in adjuncts, see DEMOCRATIC STAFF OF THE HOUSE COMM. ON EDUC. & THE WORKFORCE, THE JUST-IN-TIME PROFESSOR (2014), available at <http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/sites/democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/files/documents/1.24.14-AdjunctEforumReport.pdf>.

38. BOK, *supra* note 2, at 404–05.

39. *Id.* at 34, 40–41, 59, 113, 128–29, 160, 351.

40. See BOWEN & BOK, *supra* note 12.

tinue to enroll a large number of minority students.⁴¹ All this is sensible and persuasive.

My quarrel is with the exclusively specific and practical grounds on which Bok defends affirmative action—namely, the educational benefits it confers upon students who study alongside people who are different from themselves and the contributions it makes to diversifying “the leadership class” in government and in other major organizations and professions.⁴² These are very solid reasons for using racial preferences in college and university admissions decisions, and, so far, the Supreme Court has accepted them. Absent from Bok’s discussion, as well as from recent court decisions, is an argument for affirmative action based on America’s heritage of racial discrimination and on simple social justice—in other words on the very ideals that inspired *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.⁴³ Columbia University president Lee Bollinger, for one, sees in recent court decisions evidence of “a long, slow drift from racial justice” and laments “the failure to renew a conversation about racial justice as the civil-rights era recedes further and further into the past.”⁴⁴ He is right. Whatever the courts may say, there are multiple arguments for affirmative action and for racial inclusion more generally, and the most compelling of these is social justice.

Bok’s life and the entire corpus of his writing attest to his deep familiarity with that ideal. And so it is fitting that *Higher Education in America* returns toward the end to its most troubling finding, which is that far too many young Americans are not going to college and, in today’s circumstances, have no realistic prospect of doing so. This fact is deeply concerning to Bok, as it should be to all of us. “Unless our levels of educational attainment,” he writes, “resume the steady increase that occurred in this country over many previous generations, inequality of income is likely to continue rising, the economy will grow more slowly, and many deserving students will be denied opportunities to succeed according to their abilities and aspirations.”⁴⁵ Although Bok admirably believes that colleges and universities should solve problems for themselves, *this* problem is different, as he well knows. Solving it will require a renewed partnership on behalf of educational opportunity between colleges and universities and the federal and state governments. Even more, it will depend upon a twenty-first century version of the conviction—held by Americans of the World War II

41. BOK, *supra* note 2, at 132.

42. *Id.* at 130.

43. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

44. Lee C. Bollinger, *A Long Slow Drift From Racial Justice*, N.Y. TIMES, June 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/25/opinion/a-long-slow-drift-from-racial-justice.html>; see also Lee C. Bollinger, *To Move Forward We Must Look Back*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (June 27, 2013), <http://chronicle.com/article/To-Move-Forward-We-Must-Look/140053>.

45. BOK, *supra* note 2, at 408.

generation—that our whole society benefits when more people graduate from a college or university and that boosting higher educational attainment is again worthy of the nation’s unwavering commitment and a far greater investment of its taxpayers’ hard-won dollars.

