

Higher Education in America. Derek Bok. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013. 479 pp. \$35.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0-15914-0)

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Derek Bok is one of the towering figures of American Higher Education. He was president of Harvard University between 1971 and 1991 and acting president between 2006 and 2007 after the hurried and controversial departure of Larry Summers. But, above all, he is highly respected scholar because of a number of enlightening books he has authored about higher education. Now with *Higher Education in America* he has come to sum up his large experience and knowledge in this area with a seminal, comprehensive, and well-balanced treatise about colleges and universities in this country.

The book contains 18 chapters grouped in five parts: (1) the “Context” [sort of introductory section], (2) undergraduate and graduate education, (3) professional education, (4) research and, (5) “Final Reckoning” [sort of a conclusion]. It would be impossible to summarize in a book review the vastness and erudition of this book. Yet, the encyclopedic knowledge contained therein does not deviate from what the book is really all about: what colleges and universities can do to improve themselves.

Chapter 1 is an excellent one that helps the reader learn about how U.S. institutions of higher education (IHE) have evolved to what they are today: from the first colleges in colonial America to the more than 5,000 ones that include ca. 200 research universities, 700 comprehensive universities, 2,000 four-year colleges, 1,000 community colleges and more than 1,300 for profit ones. After discussing the similarities and the tremendous differences among all of them, Bok delves into both strengths and weaknesses of these institutions. For the latter he cites reduction of government funding, increase regulations, anemic preparation of most of our students in high schools, and the difficulty to actually evaluate performance. For this as for the rest of the book, the author uses up-to-date information, very suitable statistics, and balanced presentation of different topics, completed with well-researched sources on information, sometimes including comparisons with what is going on in other parts of the world such as western Europe or the emerging economies of Asia.

For example, the reader will find a very thorough discussion for understanding why tuition keeps increasing at levels above the inflation index. Bok includes figures that show that most students, whether in public or private institutions, are subsidized (some of them very heavily) and that one of the reasons for the higher cost of college is the eroding financial support from government which, together with increasing regulations and student demands for amenities –among other things- have made the cost of higher education what it is today. Although not specifically discussed when talking about the lowering of state support for public institutions, part of the problem has been the pervasive populism among many legislators (in the whole political spectrum) who carelessly cut taxes while demanding that IHE provide a high quality education that at the same time is more accessible and affordable. This is a math that just does not add up.

At the root of many of the problems faced by IHE today are issues beyond their control such as economic downturns, societal inequalities, and the lack of appropriate preparation by students in high school. Although not discussed or mentioned by name in the book, the “no child left behind” policy emphasizing preparation for tests instead for knowledge and skills is one of the culprits of such deficiencies.

Today’s “hot” issues in higher education such as an expanding offering of on-line courses and the MOOCs (Massive Open On-line Courses) are thoroughly discussed. He recognizes that these alternatives do provide more accessibility to higher education but, yet, its effectiveness in improving the quality of learning is debatable (due largely to the lack of reliable data) while completion rates (particularly for MOOCs) are very low and the costs of offering on-line education are not always lower than the conventional deliveries. The solution may lay on letting basic knowledge being delivered via on-line and

use the class time for more engaging teaching like the one suggested by others¹. That will require, of course, more work time for students which may be a problem because as Bok shows through some of the statistics (p. 183), college students are decreasing the time they spend studying.

Another topic discussed is affirmative action, one that has been under attack in many states of the country for which the courts have become more and more assertive (and even intrusive) in its application as a concept. One of the statistics that Bok shows in that book debunks the notion that minority students do less well in highly selective colleges and universities.

Some other topics of great interest are discussed at length such as the overemphasis on vocational studies (p. 169). Bok rightly presents some statistics demonstrating that employers are not really looking for more technical skill among graduates but rather the type of preparation that one gets through a liberal arts education: communication skills, critical thinking, ethical values, and the ability to work with others regardless of those people backgrounds.

Bok also talks about the inclination by students in taking less rigorous courses and the effects of grade inflation (p. 185), how graduate schools fail miserably in preparing students for academic life (p. 231), the issue of tenure and “deadwoods” (tenured faulty members who stop being productive after getting tenure, p. 362), and the like. For the latter, Bok discusses that we do not really need tenure to protect academic freedom—a freedom that could be achieved by other means—while saying the drawbacks of eliminating the system could be harmful since they will make an academic career less attractive to bright minds.

My favorite chapter is number 18, where he summarizes “Matters of genuine concern,” an excellent summary of the major issues that threaten IHE the way we know them. One of those issues is the lack of appropriate leadership at the top of these institutions. Today college and university presidents spend less and less time dealing with academic issues while being burdened with heavy involvement in fundraising, attendance to social and sporting events, whilst managing increasingly complex organizations. Unfortunately there is not such a thing a “school for college presidents” and that, again, shows the failure of graduate schools to prepare students for academic life. Bok shows that the major reason why the rank-and-file faculty members distrust college presidents is because of their invisibility at strict academic functions. That is not helped by the fact that more and more board of trustees are choosing as college presidents individuals from outside academia who have little understanding of the peculiarities of higher education.

Despite being a book published this year and very up-to-date information, it came out right before the announcement of the proposal from the Obama Administration to rank IHE based on measurements such as graduation rates, whose direct connection with the quality of education received is tenuous at best. The new ranking proposed by this plan will certainly throw out of the window the most popular ones such as *U.S. News and World Report*, changing the public perception about “high quality” IHE and what these institutions will do budget-wise, to accommodate in order to improve their ranking under this new system.

In summary this is a “must-read” piece not only to all those interested in becoming administrators in IHE but also for faculty and staff. One is never too surprised to realize how little faculty members really know about the way IHE work, no matter how long they spend working into the system. That is sometimes at the root of mistrust and paranoia among faculty toward “administration.” Of course we could say that this book will be very useful for legislators, board of trustees members, and philanthropists, but that is another matter.

¹ See, for example, J.A. Bowen “Teaching naked: how moving technology out of the college classroom will improve student learning” (2012). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.