

Book Review

Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More

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“Over 80 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require at least some postsecondary education. In today’s global economy, the best jobs go to the most skilled and most motivated workers” (US Department of Education, 2005). What is the public perception of college? What should students be learning in college? The US Department of Education Commission on the Future of Higher Education asks, “how well are institutions of higher education preparing our students to compete in the new global economy? Everyone has a stake in our higher education system and the outcome of this debate” (US Department of Education, 2005). The purpose of higher education is the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Or is it? Derek Bok has a distinguished career in higher education and extensive tenure at Harvard. At Harvard University, Dr. Bok is the 300th Anniversary

University Professor, University President Emeritus, Faculty Chair of the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations and has been a Professor of Law, Dean of the Law School, and President of Harvard University. On July 1, 2006, he again became Interim President of Harvard pending the choice of a new permanent president. He has written six books on higher education all concerning the state of higher education reflecting his ongoing legacy of research. His current book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, seems to culminate a life’s work studying the purpose of higher education.

The literary journey begins with Bok highlighting and briefly challenging all the critiques of education in America, and the shift to cacophonous critiques of higher education such as the revolution of technology, global competition, commercialization, saturation in



curriculum, uncaring professors, as well as other widely publicized appraisals. Dr. Bok's book returns to a simple question and concept of teaching and learning. What should the undergraduate education entail? *What should* students learn? *How* does college affect students? This book aims to treat all four-year colleges the same in his evaluation of institutions and the critical need to convert back to a fundamental purpose.

To begin, Bok gives a brief historical commentary of the evolution of colleges while addressing a diversity of perspectives and eras in American history. He fluently describes the environment prior to the Civil War "when colleges united around a classical curriculum aimed at mental discipline and character building. No one today would willingly return to that antebellum model of student recitations" (p. 24). He highlights influences of American leaders like Woodrow Wilson and his notion of public service, and expounds on the Morrill Act of 1862 and its impact on the fundamental vocational education, as well as the catalytic GI Bill and the expansion of electives, to name a few. He justifies this initial journey by saying, "at the very least, anyone wishing to criticize or reform undergraduate education should know its history well enough to understand what important changes have occurred and what features of undergraduate education have remained essentially the same over time" (p. 11–12).

After Bok's historical foundation, *Our Underachieving Colleges* is broken into three parts: Faculty Attitudes toward Undergraduate Education, Purposes of Undergraduate Education,

and Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.

Throughout, Bok challenges faculty to assess and explore a meaningful pedagogy that helps students integrate knowledge. "While pockets of innovation exist throughout American higher education, most professors teach as they traditionally have, confident that the ways that have worked well enough in the past will continue to serve them in the future. Though trained in research themselves, they continue to ignore the accumulating body of experimental work suggesting that forms of teaching engage students actively in the learning process" (p. 312). His discussion confronts the existing faculty attitudes that impede the above teaching outcomes as subtle yet more complicated (and "troubling") tendencies in academic freedom and faculty governance today. Bok repeatedly reminds us that there are no existing incentives to change how students learn, at the risk of induced attrition of faculty and students, or diminish the existing pressures and competition that holds the institution together. Divergence in posture on the role of the university, barriers in inter-departmental collaboration, lack of comprehensive assessment of purpose and curriculum, the maintenance of an unmanageable "general education" concept with little regard for clarity in its purpose, and the common problem of neglect of pedagogy and extra curriculum, all are given compelling role as causes for the "underachieving college."

In Chapter Three, Bok briefly describes a menu of purposes of the undergraduate experience with the aim to foster predominantly accepted human



capital. Bok submits that the purposes of undergraduate education should include learning the following: *the ability to communicate, critical thinking, moral reasoning, citizenship, the ability to live with diversity, the ability to live in a more global society, the ability to acquire broader interests, and career preparation*. Bok eloquently denotes that “many faculties have adopted impressive goals without knowing how to achieve them. Such quixotic efforts waste students’ time and often leave them disappointed and disillusioned. These are consequences every college should try to avoid” (p. 81).

“More students than ever are participating in higher education and the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired during college are essential for the post-college success of individuals, preparation of an informed citizenry, and continued expansion of an information-based economy” (Hu and Kuh, 2003, p. 185). Will the market demands and external influence on the four-year college serve as the impetus for catalytic change or complacency? Hu and Kuh (2003) further argue that most conversation around college quality is preoccupied with the accumulation and allocation of institutional resources and reputation with only weak links to student learning. Bok concludes, “with encouragement and prodding, careful research, and modest support for innovation, leaders in every college can aspire to create a culture of honest self-appraisal, continuing experimentation, and constant improvement” (p. 343). Is Bok poised, as interim president at Harvard University, to prompt a destined change in higher education or is this yet another lofty critique on an

American institution that reflects the angst of society? Only time will tell.

Neither American students nor our universities, nor the nation itself, can afford to take for granted the quality of higher education and the teaching and learning it provides. To be sure, professors and academic leaders must keep a proper perspective. It is especially important to bear in mind all the purposes universities serve and to resist efforts to turn them into instruments preoccupied chiefly with helping the economy grow. But resisting commercialization cannot become an excuse for resisting change. Rather, universities need to recognize the risks of complacency and use the emerging worldwide challenge as an occasion for a candid reappraisal to discover whether there are ways to lift the performance of our institutions of higher learning to new and higher levels. (Bok, 2006, p. 6)

Our Underachieving Colleges skillfully addresses the multiversities our society has developed and how their complexities have obscured the pure notion of teaching and learning.

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References

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