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# Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More. (Derek Bok)

A Review Essay by Jean-Noel Thompson, Ph. D.

In considering the successes and ills of American society, many have turned to the institution of higher education as a primary contributor. The concepts of assessment, accountability, and higher education reform continue to pervade the halls of colleges and university nation-wide. In *Our Underachieving Colleges*, Derek Bok raises some fundamental questions and relevant criticism of past and current efforts to examine the effectiveness of institutions of higher education. “Put bluntly, the widely publicized critiques of four-year colleges are largely a digression, diverting attention from questions of pedagogy, the college major, the neglect of moral development and civic education, and other truly serious educational problems.” (pg. 56) In lieu of such approaches, the author argues that a better way to examine the strengths and weaknesses our colleges is to begin “with a careful look at the purposes to be achieved” (pg. 57).

As Bok considers the purposes of higher education, he unapologetically dives more deeply than the expected scholastic, professional, and vocational aims. Perhaps, such an approach lends the necessary pressure that colleges need to instead seek a more compelling institutional purpose. Bok asserts that institutions of higher education should drive a purpose that encompasses efforts to foster among students generally accepted values and behaviors including honesty, sound character, and racial tolerance. The author identifies and elaborates on six purposes of higher education he deems especially important in preparing young adults: (1) The ability to communicate; (2) Critical thinking; (3) Moral reasoning; (4) Preparing citizens; (5) Living with diversity; and (6) Living in a more global society. Considering the audience for which this review is intended, “moral reasoning” will be given special attention later in this review.

*Our Underachieving Colleges* is highly recommended. This book is an insightful lesson for college constituency at all levels of academic and co-curricular departments. Bok brings over 100 years of undergraduate education history to a poignant summary, offering an honest and eye-opening review of several related works. This book is both a timeless and a timely work. Timeless in that the author raises fundamental questions about higher education which are sure to remain directly relevant to our work. Timely with respect to the salient issues institutions of higher education are currently facing. In arguing his points, Bok references a wide variety of literature and research studies, ranging from Pascarella and Terenzini’s research on how college affects students, to Mina Shaughnessy’s guides for teaching basic writing. Furthermore, the author comprehensively cites the Department of Education and other statistics reporting organizations in his efforts to support his claims. This combined with Bok’s impressive credentials and personal experience in higher education lends strength and validity to his arguments.

While this book is important and well written, it is appropriate to point out a possible shortcoming. Perhaps this criticism will be more meaningful and/or accepted by professionals in higher education who value a Christian worldview. An underlying message Bok refers to throughout this book is that undergraduate education has meandered away from many of the foundational principles and classical curriculum found in colleges before the Civil War, such as training the intellect and building character. Particularly with respect to building character and ethical behavior among students, Bok only skims the surface of the significance that religion has played in this regard. For instance, he briefly mentions that “religious orthodoxy also lost its grip on many colleges”, and that “faith was no longer thought central to the development of moral character” (pg. 15). Historically, the author addresses this issue of character and moral development more from a curricular standpoint related to required courses, classical texts, and the role that faculty should or should not play in this regard. While it is perhaps pleasing to know that Bok has minimally recognized the role of religion or faith in higher education, he has not sufficiently stressed the true importance of faith in the discussion of character building on moral and ethical grounds. Furthermore, there is no discussion on how current institutions of higher education (both faith-based and secular) integrate faith as a means to moral and ethical behavior among students. In all fairness to the author, there exists today an expansive body of literature on the topic of character building and moral development among students that does not give weight to the integration of faith and learning.

The central point one might glean from this book, is Bok’s warning that colleges and universities in America have become complacent in their ability to truly teach college-age youth. He credits such complacency to the number of students who exit institutions of higher education ill-prepared to successfully navigate the world and people around them. Bok targets several competing issues within the current system of higher education for this complacency such as: a lack of clear purpose within institutions of higher learning; the notion that serious problems in higher education are not correctly identified, nor clearly understood by those responsible for making needed change; a disconnect among and between academic departments; a general emphasis among faculty to pursue research and other professional endeavors at the expense of quality teaching; and a general attitude among higher education constituency that American colleges and universities are superior to such institutions in other countries. Having raised these concerns, it is important to recognize that the underlying intent of Bok’s work in this book is to raise some important issues and questions, and not necessarily to offer specific solutions. He leaves it to individual institutions of higher education to first recognize such issues, and then to form appropriate solutions. Furthermore, Bok offers the reader the good news “...that most of the serious deficiencies can be overcome, at least to a significant degree, given the will to do so” (pg. 10).

As a result of reading this book, it is hoped that administrators, faculty, and student affairs practitioners in higher education will be inspired by Bok’s simple, yet compelling message that “we can do better” to prepare college students for the world they will soon join and lead.

Derek Bok is President Emeritus and Research Professor at Harvard University. He has authored major books on higher education which include *The Shape of the River* (with William Bowen), and *The Commercialization of Higher Education*.