

'Higher Education in America'  
by Derek Bok

## Michael S. Roth



American higher education is the envy of the world. Students flock to this country from all over, and the most highly ranked schools tend to be here. We should be proud!

American higher education is a mess. With high costs, low graduation rates, unhappy faculty members and coddled students, our universities are about to be radically disrupted by massive, technologically driven change. A good thing, too!

How to reconcile these opposing views? At a time when ambitious business-school professors and salivating entrepreneurs predict the end of the university as we know it, and at a time when we have never been more in need of an educated workforce and citizenry, the task of understanding the evolving mission and performance of American higher education has never been more urgent. Thank goodness Derek Bok, a two-time president of Harvard and a judicious, learned analyst of education, has taken on this undertaking. His book is too long to be called a report card, but it is a detailed progress report on the challenges and opportunities facing our nation's colleges and universities.

One of the first things to note about higher ed in the United States is its heterogeneity. The problems of Harvard are not the same as the problems of the University of Texas or those of Scripps College in California or of LaGuardia Community College in New York. Bok tries to address schools in all their multiplicity, and his book suffers somewhat from the clunkiness that also characterizes higher ed. The book's five sections discuss instruction from undergraduate to graduate and professional schools, as well as the market forces at work at each level. After the introduction, there are five forewords and four afterwords — not including the short final chapter called 'The Last Word.' Yet one forgives redundancies because of the thoroughness of the research and the measured judgment consistently applied.

After noting the variety in higher ed, Bok acknowledges the extraordinary inequalities in the sector. Public discussion of education often focuses on the schools most difficult to get into, but 'no more than two hundred colleges regularly reject more students than they admit.' At most highly selective schools (such as the one at which I am president), students receive some subsidy from the institution — even those paying full tuition. Students enrolled at less-selective schools get a small fraction of that support. Public institutions have seen dramatic reductions in state support for universities, and many flagship campuses are scrambling for donations and out-of-state, full-tuition-paying students. Community colleges enroll dramatically more people than other parts of the sector, but most of these students will never earn a degree.

Bok shows that the current quip that universities haven't changed their teaching styles since the Middle Ages is just an empty canard. Universities have adapted surprisingly well to massive changes in technology, in demography and in developing streams of support. But Bok is no Pollyana, emphasizing that 'universities have been especially slow to act ... in improving the quality of undergraduate education.' Professors often confuse their desire to teach what interests them the most with what undergrads need to learn, and students in recent years are spending far less time on their studies than in past generations. Bok shows how schools cater to students in order to attract more of them, often with little attention to how campus amenities provide distractions from studying.

Bok knows the governance structures of universities as well as anyone, and he realizes that true curricular reform has to be led by the faculty. The challenge, from his perspective, is to make the faculty (at least its leadership) more aware of the empirical work on student learning that has been done over the past decade. Professors may be focused on their research and distracted by committee work, but the evidence shows that they care deeply about teaching effectiveness.

'The key to educational reform,' Bok writes, 'lies in gathering evidence that will convince faculty that current teaching methods are not accomplishing the results that the professors assume are taking place.' Once the teachers understand the need for change, they will rise to the occasion and create classes that are more effective at developing the capacities that most agree are essential in college graduates. They have done so in the past, and they will do so again.

[http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-08-30/opinions/41616883\\_1\\_selective-schools-students-flock-universities](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-08-30/opinions/41616883_1_selective-schools-students-flock-universities)