

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Bok, Derek. (2013). *Higher Education in America*. Baltimore, MD: Princeton University Press. Pages: 496. Price: USD\$35.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-691-15914-0 (printed); 978-1-400-84830-0 (ebook)**

Reviewed by Sabita Ramlal, Doctoral Student, PhD in Education, Faculty of Education/Manager, Enrolment Planning, Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, York University.

Former Harvard President Derek Bok's latest book is an ambitious exercise in which he acknowledges the strengths of the American higher education system, while drawing attention to areas for improvement. The book puts forwards an agenda for change that he indicates has to come from within HE institutions; academic leaders and faculty members, aided by accreditation bodies, need to take steps to collaboratively address the "vulnerabilities" that Bok identifies in institutions. Bok contests the general view that HE institutions are slow to change, noting institutions have risen to various challenges over the years such as adapting to demographic and technological changes, including the demands of society after World II and the advent of mass higher education. Bok cites a vast array of U.S. research to support his arguments, presenting the reader with a balanced view of each "change item." According to Bok, the two key issues facing American PSE institutions are stagnated graduation rates over the past 30 years, resulting in other countries surpassing the US in HE attainment rates, and the need to improve the quality of undergraduate education. Both issues have implications for America's international competitiveness. The challenge in achieving these goals, notes Bok, is funding higher education for "universal" participation in the context of declining government revenues and household incomes and increasing tuition rates and student debt.

First, meeting the federal government's goal of increasing graduation rates is challenging and sometimes impeded by state funding policies that cut funding by the amount of federal increases in student aid, thereby defeating the goal of decreasing costs to students, especially lower-income, in-state groups. He suggests online learning as a possible way to decrease instructional costs. Bok contends that remedial instruction is a mechanism for improving access and retention of students to comprehensive universities, community colleges, and private colleges, where many moderate and lower-income students already

attend, noting that the increase in the HE attainment rate will have to come from this pool of students. Bok is not supportive of fundraising through so-called *internationalization* efforts via branch campuses abroad; instead, he optimistically suggests that funds generated abroad could be used to provide HE access for local students who cannot afford higher education in the branch campus countries. He also sounds a warning note that opening branch campuses in countries that do not respect equality and human rights or where academic values are not respected will compromise the reputation of the universities back in America.

Second, improving the quality of undergraduate education requires a new vision and diverse solutions. Bok suggests the longstanding tripartite structure of the undergraduate curriculum (major, electives, and general education) needs to be revisited because it is built on “a series of unexamined premises, implausible assertions, and unrealistic hopes” (p. 175). Improving the quality of undergraduate education requires a focus on increasing how much students learn by improving their critical thinking and analytical skills through curricula reform, revising instructional methods, and conducting continuous assessment of learning at the course, program, and faculty level. Bok cites research indicating that American professors seem to care more about their teaching responsibility “than their counterparts in other advanced nations in Europe and Asia” (p. 202) in order to argue that, presented with evidence of academic inadequacy, faculty members would indeed reform curricula. Additionally, he notes that the declining hours of study and grade inflation of undergraduate students is a serious problem that needs to be addressed, but one that cannot be addressed by dropping standards. In order to improve graduate education, reform is needed in preparing students for faculty and non-faculty careers. He critiques the “publish or perish” practice, which is dismissive of teaching skills and is detrimental to PhD students who will comprise the future faculty. He suggests building courses on teaching into the graduate curriculum. He briefly addresses the challenges facing professional education—using law, medicine, and business as his focus—and expresses optimism that professional schools can implement curricula and administrative reform to produce graduates who have the knowledge, skills, and ethics required in a diverse society to fulfill their responsibilities to their profession, clients, and society.

Bok also notes the importance of university research to economic development, viewing the formation of the EU and the rise of China and other Asian countries as threats to U.S. leadership in research. He notes that the emergence of research as a major mandate of universities came later, challenging the idea that research overshadows effective teaching and that “pronounced research orientation” (p. 341) negatively impacts the time faculty members allocate to PhD instruction, improvements in curriculum, courses, and methods of instruction. He also has a positive view of research universities’ close relations with industry and involvement in commercialization efforts, which he regards as a contributor to U.S. economic growth. He does, however, admit that monitoring conflicts of interest and faculty time spent on non-teaching and private income activities is a challenge for U.S. institutions. Although he acknowledges that universities have not done enough to maintain the public trust as conflicts of interest and industry influence on published research threaten academic values, Bok has a high tolerance for the level of faculty involvement in commercialization of research and private business activities. This is a unique feature of the US university system, which other countries may view as detrimental to academic

freedom and institutional autonomy. Although he does not use the word, Bok seems to support “differentiation”—a buzzword in Canada—suggesting that institutions attempting to become research intensive would be better off improving undergraduate education. Although he sees the competitive nature of the U.S. HE system as being good for growth, development, and diversity, he recognizes this also results in wasteful recruitment campaigns to attract high-performing students in which scholarships are given to students with high GPAs who may not need funding instead of under-represented students who depend on it—all to improve one’s place in the media rankings.

While most of the issues raised are not new, their compilation into one cohesive book provides a convenient reference for HE administrators, researchers, and professors in reviewing their own institutional practices. Bok’s expert knowledge of the internal workings of HE institutions is clear, but the book could have benefited from some insight into the future of HE in relation to public policy. Bok’s pride in the American system is apparent, as he notes the attempts by European universities to copy some of the practices that have been part of the U.S. system for generations, such as deriving funding from non-governmental sources. Despite system differences, many other jurisdictions are preoccupied with the same issues, including increasing educational attainment rates in HE, funding higher education in a time of mass participation and declining government revenues, increasing the quality of education, increasing retention and graduation rates as an investment for international competitiveness, grade inflation and reduced student effort, student debt, exploring online learning to increase access and reduce costs, and commercializing university research. Because America continues to be a leader on many issues in higher education, the book commands a broader audience beyond the US. Although long, the book is an easy read. It will be useful to policymakers, HE administrators, students, and professors of higher education. ♣