

## Review of Derek Bok's *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?*

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**T**he weakness of student learning in American colleges and universities and the need for improvement have been preoccupations, if not obsessions, of critics of higher education since the 1980s. A succession of reports and initiatives by government commissions, educational agencies, states, and foundations have addressed this alleged problem. Initially, most focused on improving teaching. After 2000, “engagement” was promoted as a key to stimulate greater learning. State legislators have applied financial rewards or punishments in the form of performance-based funding. And a commission appointed by President George W. Bush advocated measuring and publicizing each institution’s learning score to induce competitive pressures. These efforts have produced some reform in practices, but the results are more equivocal. Still, the large earnings premium accorded college graduates would seem to indicate some intrinsic value to their studies.

Derek Bok has long championed this cause. President of Harvard from 1971-1991, and again from 2006-2007, he has long had a unique stature as a spokesperson on higher education. *Higher Expectations*, written in his ninetieth year, is his third volume devoted to student learning in addition to the extensive coverage in his magnum opus, *Higher Education in America*. Improving undergraduate education has been a consistent concern of Boks’ and, as with most writers in this genre, so has criticism of professors for remaining impervious. Bok devoted his first presidential speech to the Harvard faculty to the subject of undergraduate

teaching, but a senior professor later confided that three quarters of the faculty “gave up on me entirely when I announced the subject” (viii). Nearly fifty years later, Bok acknowledges the same obstacles to teaching students “what they need to know,” but now explores ways to overcome it (177).

Bok’s writings are characterized by an implacable reasonableness, recognition of all sides of issues, honest consideration of contrary arguments, and qualified or tentative resolutions. Besides drawing on his incomparable personal experience, he also incorporates the most recent and credible academic research. *Higher Expectations* differs from his earlier writings in being predicated on an external project—the extensive reform proposals developed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU)—*College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007). Funded by several foundations, this project consulted representatives of employers, government, and universities to develop a consensus on “essential learning outcomes” (18). It then compiled further reports on how colleges might achieve them. Bok, with out-of-character hyperbole, calls this initiative “the most ambitious attempt in over one-hundred years to reform American undergraduate education . . . [and] the nearest approximation ever produced of a consensus among academic leaders, reform-minded professors, employers and public officials” (20). The AACU recommended comprehensive changes that would require “new courses, widespread redesign of existing courses, and innovative methods of instruction” (20-21).

The AACU learning outcomes barely acknowledge the academic substance of higher education. Rather, they emphasize “intellectual and practical skills,” “personal and social responsibility,” and “integrative and applied learning.” (18-19) In *Higher Expectations* Bok subjects these learning outcomes to critical scrutiny, weighing alleged benefits against criticism and obstacles. The final chapters consider implementation and basically endorse these innovations and the rejiggering needed to pursue these goals.

Should universities embrace the goal of educating citizens? If so, they do a lamentable job. Bok suggests a required course on civic education covering how government works in the United States, issues of public policy, and fundamental principles of justice, among other things. Together with other electives, civic education might also be expected to enhance critical thinking, media literacy (skepticism?), and appreciation of diversity. A similar goal would have all students acquire intercultural competence through some form of international studies. Given that these latter fields are “so vast and continually changing,” no specific courses should be required (56). At best, students might be guided to electives that complement their interests.

Both these recommendations are rife with uncritical thinking. Can universities instill civic responsibility while teaching American history as a concatenation of injustices? And any invocation of “global” (learning,

citizenship, problems) is impossibly inclusive. The other learning outcomes avoid such confounding realities by aiming to affect only personal behavior.

Bok would have colleges strive to strengthen the character of their students—to develop greater conscientiousness, higher standards of ethical behavior, and greater personal responsibility. Next, they could help students find purpose and meaning in life. Interpersonal abilities could be bolstered through teaching people skills, teamwork, and interracial understanding. Intrapersonal skills might be honed by enhancing creativity, inclinations for lifelong learning, and perseverance and resilience. Perhaps, he suggests, colleges should teach meditation and happiness psychology as well.

The chief obstacle to this vision is the university. Universities are organized to teach subject matter, academic and professional. They are organized into schools and departments based on subject specialization, and they carefully select faculty for their expertise in those fields. Hence, Bok repeatedly notes that faculty are not trained to teach personal development topics and in fact resist suggestions that they should. Nor are students likely to welcome instruction in “what they need to know in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (177). College students choose the subjects they want or need to study, and in fact are almost universally skeptical of required ‘gen-ed’ courses.

Personal behaviors constitute an entirely different dimension from curricula. Many involve psychology’s Big Five personality traits—conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, and extroversion (the fifth trait is neuroses). These are substantially inherited dispositions, but Bok assures us that research has shown that they can be modified (are “teachable”) in young adults. More problematic is how students would react to mandatory efforts to modify their personal selves. Granted, there would appear to be much room for improvement (the premise of this book) but given the enormous range of personality traits—virtues and deficiencies—it is difficult to imagine instruction that would be effective or appropriate for all. Bok cites studies that find positive outcomes from instruction in moral reasoning, citizenship, etc. His basic argument is that these behaviors involve “habits, skills, and qualities of mind that might be improved through . . . capable instruction” (137).

Addressing personal behaviors has been largely consigned to non-faculty staff in student affairs and counseling, where it has been random and fragmented. Rather, Bok has faith that expanded educational research can establish the effectiveness of learning innovations, even though “the quality and rigor” of existing studies “tend to be weak” (156). Nevertheless, throughout the book he advises that innovations should not be required or implemented until research has proven their efficacy. However, despite widespread public endorsement of developmental learning outcomes and promising preliminary initiatives, the prospect of support from tenure-track faculty is hopeless. Instead, Bok recommends

the creation of a separate teaching faculty. It might be argued that this has largely occurred through the substantial cadres of non-tenure track faculty now employed. However, they are primarily academics manque, whose insecure positions create incentives for keeping students entertained (engaged), not challenging them. Bok envisages “a carefully selected, full-time teaching faculty primarily for the first two years of college,” who, as secure faculty members, could “devote more time and effort to improving the quality of [teaching] . . . to new developments in teaching and curriculum and spend[ing] more time experimenting with innovative methods of instruction” (167-8).

Wishful thinking. Realistically, a separate teaching faculty is a fundamentally bad idea. Where it has been tried (usually with the blessing of research-minded faculty) invidious distinctions between the two classes of faculty have been a source of much unhappiness. It seems most appropriate for developmentally challenged students, but it would be likely to alienate the academically able. Opportunity costs would be substantial—for universities, hiring teachers with developmental training instead of promising scholars, as well as the higher costs of small classes; for students, Bok suggests foregoing the opportunity for electives from their finite course lists.

Defining the aims of higher education in terms of “essential learning outcomes,” if pushed to logical extremes, would seem to lead to dubious results. The AAC&U agenda is predicated on stakeholders’ image of what they would like higher education to be, not the realities of American undergraduate education. Since 2000, concerted efforts to improve teaching have taken root in higher education, as Bok acknowledges. A large proportion of aspiring professors have sought pedagogical training and now employ more effective approaches in their teaching. Universities have sought to embed intellectual skills into introductory courses. Many universities do in fact offer elective courses in happiness, wellness, and other subjects recommended by Bok in an entire chapter devoted to meditation and positive psychology. They resonate with the greater self-absorption of today’s students. And a majority of college students graduate in professional subjects that are designed to impart applications of knowledge and skills. The notable learning deficiencies that still plague American higher education are significantly due to inadequate academic preparation and market forces that encourage consumerism. *Higher Expectations* provides an exhaustive account of the possibilities and problems of expanding college education to incorporate personal development goals. But altering the academic structure of universities to achieve such ambiguous learning outcomes is a bridge too far. And we shouldn’t try to go there.