

Author addresses fallacies, facts behind failing schools

In recent years, it has become fashionable and even trendy to criticize higher education. It makes for a good newspaper column, magazine article or blog. And although much of what has been written about academia during the past few decades is not without merit, the truth of the matter is that things are not quite as bad as many would have us believe.

Derek Bok acknowledges this in the introduction to his latest treatise, "Our Underachieving Colleges," when he asserts that "the widely publicized critiques of the past 20 years are not a particularly helpful guide for deciding what needs to be done."

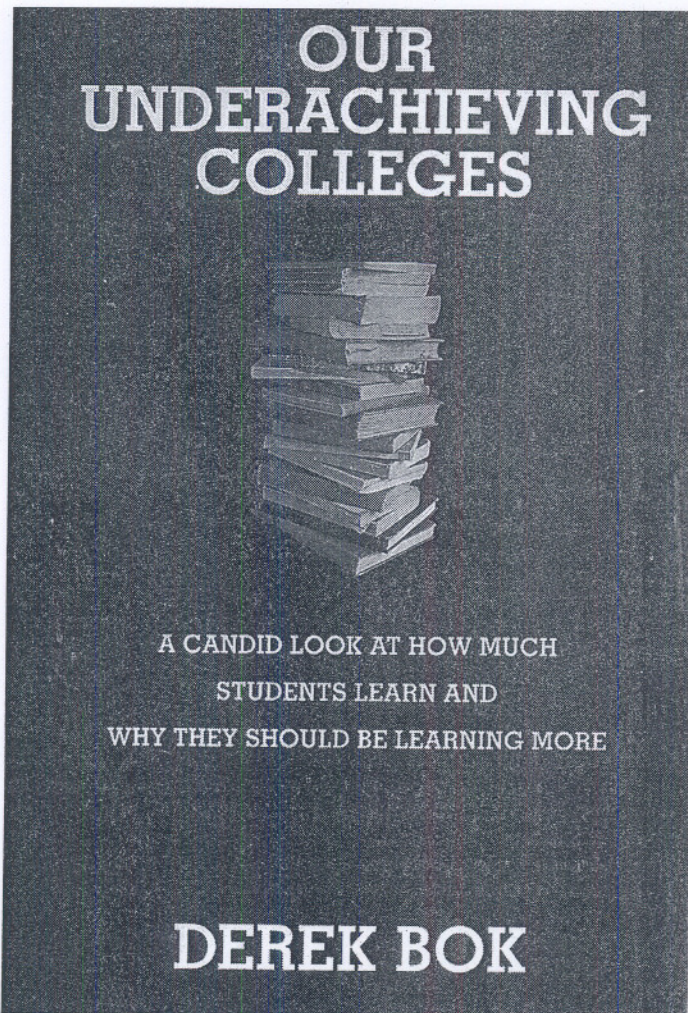
Good point.

As far as credentials go, Bok seems eminently qualified to provide meaningful insights into the current state of higher education, as well as its potential for both good and evil. He is a president emeritus and research professor at Harvard University who has written extensively on academia. Two of his more noteworthy and influential books include "The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions," a collaboration with William Bowen, a former president of Yale University, and "Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education."

It would be difficult to argue that Bok does not know his subject matter in more than just a superficial sense.

"Our Underachieving Colleges" consists of 12 chapters, each addressing the various challenges Bok sees facing today's colleges and universities. Bok has done his homework and presents his ideas both eloquently and convincingly.

For example, one of the issues Bok discusses relates to the pros and cons of faculty governance, i.e. the traditional view that the faculty should retain ultimate control over the curriculum and, as such, the institution. He correctly notes that, in recent years, faculty governance has significantly eroded as administrators have asserted more and more control over the academy. Typically, this more centralized approach to managing colleges and universities has been rationalized and justified by some version of the tired "If we don't police ourselves, someone will eventually do it for us" argument.



A CANDID LOOK AT HOW MUCH
STUDENTS LEARN AND
WHY THEY SHOULD BE LEARNING MORE

DEREK BOK

"Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More,"
by Derek Bok. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006.
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But, as Bok also observes, "No one ever improved the quality of teaching by ordering professors to offer better courses." The real power at any college or university should rest squarely and legitimately in the hands of the faculty, although the faculty do have an innate responsibility to exercise that power in a conscientious and constructive manner.

In another section, Bok argues that legislators, particularly at the state level, seem to be expecting greater results from higher education while simultaneously diminishing the resources available to achieve those results. Bok concludes that "there is little prospect that state governments will succeed in imposing effective performance measures from the outside,

let alone force improvements in learning by penalties and rewards." Here, Bok demonstrates a keen insight into the nature of how improvement should be facilitated in higher education.

At the same time, however, his simultaneous assertion that "real improvement requires the initiative and skills of academic leaders – presidents, provosts and deans – who understand what needs to be done" is cause for some concern. We are in an era that is driven, to a large extent, by customization and flexibility. In the private sector, a decentralized management structure has been almost universally accepted as being more advantageous than a more centralized approach.

In an analogous sense within the academy, bottom-up leadership,

i.e. faculty governance, will ultimately precipitate more permanent success than top-down leadership such as administrator initiatives.

The book is perhaps most on target when Bok addresses issues more directly related to student learning. For example, it is generally agreed that fostering critical thinking skills is (or should be) central to the mission of higher education. In a chapter devoted to that topic, Bok argues persuasively that there is often a disconnect between how instructors teach and how students learn. Specifically, he sees the traditional lecture format as having serious limitations as a viable pedagogical technique.

"Improvement in critical thinking," he argues, "varies directly with the time students spend studying, the extent to which they participate actively in class, and the amount of discussion they have on intellectual matters outside class." The idea here is that a great deal of learning actually takes place outside the lecture hall, something that student affairs professionals have known for several decades.

Similarly, Bok is correct when he comments that "there is also resistance to using research on student progress to raise questions about existing teaching methods." The real question we should all be asking is *why* – although Bok's own answer to this fundamental question is somewhat unclear.

In one of his better chapters, Bok laments the poor advising that many undergraduates receive at most institutions. Specifically, he argues that "good advising with conscientious faculty participation is a goal that has eluded most colleges." Again, his position is not unsubstantiated. The reality is that instead of devoting the time and energy required to advise students in a comprehensive and thorough manner, most faculty would rather be teaching, conducting research or engaging in professional service activities.

"Our Underachieving Colleges" is definitely worth the time and effort needed to appropriately digest what Bok is asserting about contemporary higher education, as well as what needs to be done to enhance its potential in the coming decades. He articulates his views in a style that is readily accessible to a general audience, although anyone who is familiar with higher education will have a heightened appreciation for what he is saying – without necessarily agreeing with him.

—Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, professor and head of the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.