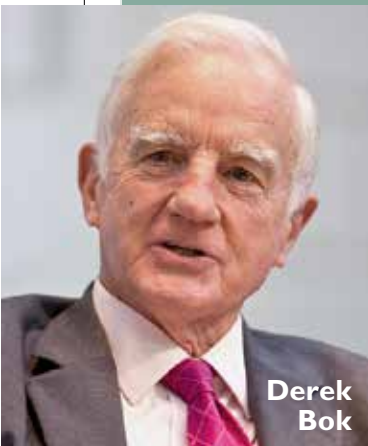


Back-to-School Bookshelf



Derek Bok

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By now, Derek Bok's two-decade initial stint as Harvard's president seems only a chapter in his career as a leader in American higher education. *The Struggle to Reform Our Colleges* (Princeton, \$29.95) is the most recent in his long series of distinguished analyses: critiques that credit the value of higher education by treating its flaws seriously and teasing out appropriate remedies. Unfashionably reasonable and soft-spoken, Bok here engages the fundamental irony: at a time when educational attainment matters more than ever, and scholars have gained new

insights into effective teaching and learning (and promising technologies to enhance both), the United States has, seemingly, made little progress. Citing the imperative to educate more of the populace, and to do so better, he writes, "It is the need to make progress toward both objectives simultaneously that presents the greatest challenge for America's colleges" now.

But where to turn when universities themselves are "conservative," tenure-track faculty members "reluctant" to alter pedagogies and curriculums, adjuncts too hard-pressed and insecure to have a voice, and few presidents eager to pursue major reforms "that could prove to be time-consuming, contentious, and ultimately unsuccessful"? Don't look to students, Bok says. Their future employers are a source of pressure for justifiable efforts "to evaluate the effects of a college education," opposition to which is "harder to defend" today. Technology may be promising. Foundations, state and federal government, and accrediting agencies might play constructive roles in raising graduation rates and enhancing quality—but the record is not encouraging.

Bok the educator thus suggests that colleges and universities act as, well, *learning* institutions: they should test and assess models like Arizona State's online tutoring as a possible way to enhance the efficacy of remedial courses; or marry financial aid to orientation, mentoring, and peer advising, to see if that boosts college

completion. Focus on better graduate education as well, he suggests, so future teachers are better prepared to educate their students; create *teaching* faculties (rather than beggar adjuncts, who handle so much introductory instruction); put those who teach in charge of revising the curriculum; and get serious about educational research.

Not very tweetable—but an agenda guided by experience, wisdom, and belief in gradual improvement. Bok notes near his conclusion: "many college leaders and their faculties are excessively optimistic about the performance of their own institution." Just perhaps, a few might listen to one of their own, and begin to assess their performance more realistically.

In an important, related vein, Nobel laureate Carl Wieman, now professor of physics and of education at Stanford, has brought his scholarly skills to bear on rigorous design and testing of better teaching. *Improving How Universities Teach Science* (Harvard University Press, \$35) helpfully guides readers through discoveries disseminated previously in education journals and forums. Nothing he proposes should be too difficult for any institution that cares about teaching and learning to implement, and the lessons are presented with clarity and force. This is the kind of emerging work Bok hopes to encourage—against the inertial forces Wieman's scientific colleagues understand so well in their own research.

Finally, just try to be objective about selective college admissions: you will find it impossible to separate your own experience, or hopes for loved ones, from your assessment. At the start of another frenzied admissions season, Rebecca Zwick (formerly of University of California, Santa Barbara, now affiliated with the Educational Testing Service) examines essentially every option and its trade-offs. The result is *Who Gets In?* (Harvard, \$35). Its last sentence says just about everything needed to move "public conversation" about admissions toward a "less rancorous and more productive" place: "The first step is for schools to reveal what is behind the curtain."

—J.S.R.



Carl Wieman

COURTESY OF CARL WIEMAN

that even though such organizations involve only a small number of students, their effects "permeate the fabric of campus culture."

The Harvard policy, as proposed, reads:

Harvard students may neither join nor participate in final clubs, fraternities or sororities, or other similar private, exclusionary social organizations that are exclusively or predominantly made up of Harvard students, whether they have any local or national affiliation, during their time in the College. The College will take disciplinary action against students who are found to be participating in such organizations.

Violations will be adjudicated by the Administrative Board.

In a dissenting opinion, Putnam professor of organismic and evolutionary biology David Haig framed the past academic year's fiercely debated sanctions policies (see "Social-Club Saga," May-June, page 18) as "a conflict between competing goods: on the one hand, respect for student autonomy and freedom of association; on the other hand, non-discrimination and inclusivity." He noted the lack of good data on the effects of such organizations, and the fact that faculty opinion of the sanctions is unknown, because the policy has "never come to the faculty for a vote." Because

a 2016 survey of students showed 60 percent of respondents in favor of repealing an earlier sanctions policy, and 30 percent in favor of retaining it, he pointed to "a disconnect between these numbers...and the general tone of this committee's report, which emphasizes deep unhappiness among students with the social environment created by the clubs...."

The committee recommending the ban was appointed in early March by dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) Michael D. Smith, and includes dean of Harvard College Rakesh Khurana as co-chair. (Khurana's earlier recommendations had led to the existing policy, and to his work with