Book review of 'The Struggle to Reform Our Colleges' by Derek Bok

- By Glenn C. Altschuler
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‘THE STRUGGLE TO REFORM OUR COLLEGES’

By Derek Bok

Princeton University, $29.95

For decades, the colleges and universities of the United States were regarded as national treasures. These days, even though an undergraduate degree is almost universally acknowledged as essential to finding a good job, living a good life, and being a good citizen, a majority of Americans wonder whether it is worth the cost.

In “The Struggle to Reform Our Colleges,” Derek Bok, the president emeritus of Harvard University, and author, whose works include “Higher Education in America” (2013), “Our Underachieving Colleges” (2006), and “Universities in the Marketplace” (2003), provides a cogent survey of the shortcomings of undergraduate education in 21st century America. Bok tries to be optimistic, but his book demonstrates that the pace of progress has been much too slow and the challenge of identifying concrete reforms that will produce “the least expensive way to graduate millions more students with the education they need” remains daunting.

Bok addresses several issues, including the roles of the federal government, state governments and philanthropic foundations, and online learning. But he focuses on access, graduation rates and educational outcomes.
The gap between the educational attainment of African Americans, Hispanics and children from low-income families and affluent whites, Bok indicates, has widened rather than narrowed. These results, he reveals, emerge only in part because of differences in academic aptitude among these groups. Surprisingly, financial aid does not necessarily result in significantly higher enrollments or retention rates for the underrepresented groups. Clearly, the United States will not meet President Obama’s goal of a 40 percent increase by 2020 in students earning college degrees.

Bok also claims that the basic structure of the undergraduate curriculum, which is divided between the major, general education requirements and electives, is not well-suited to promote critical thinking, writing and speaking skills, good citizenship, global awareness or preparation for a career. He asserts, however, that tenured professors, who want to teach courses related to their research interests, are not likely to reform it.

And Bok cites studies indicating that college graduates are not much more proficient in literacy, numeracy and problem solving than they were when they were first-year students. Among the reasons: grade inflation, which makes students more optimistic about what they have learned than they should be, and may well contribute to a dramatic decline in the number of hours per week undergraduates spend studying.

Little wonder, then, that the future of higher education is uncertain. Bok believes that more government funds would help: to make up for substantial cuts in state appropriations for higher education in the last three decades and address the socio-economic circumstances of low-income families. That said, he acknowledges that “proven ways” to increase access, retention, and the acquisition of the skills necessary to flourish in the workplace and in life “do not yet exist, or if they do exist, are not in widespread practice.”

Bok identifies some promising initiatives, but the best he can do is exhort his fellow academics and fellow citizens to accelerate the process of “self-scrutiny, experimentation and evaluation.”

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