

Derek Bok's Flawed Diagnosis of Harvard's Ailments

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COMMENTARY

Citizens have good reasons to deplore the condition of higher education in America. Rather than ensure that students acquire a solid foundation of knowledge about American ideas and institutions, master the defining opinions and events of Western civilization, and gain a well-rounded introduction to other civilizations, our colleges and universities ordinarily leave it to undergraduates to pursue such matters – if they happen to be so moved and to find pertinent courses. Far from teaching that freedom of speech and due process are essential features of communities devoted to learning and inquiry, our colleges and universities often encourage students to disdain diversity of opinion, evaluate individuals based on race, and exclude dissenting voices. Instead of fostering civility and toleration, our colleges and universities frequently stoke the grievances and amplify the resentments that disfigure American politics and divide the nation.

For decades, higher education has diverged from the basic principles of liberal education. Despite their occasional use of the term, many of those who now teach and administer our colleges and universities came of age, went to college, pursued graduate degrees, and advanced through professional ranks without encountering the substance and spirit of liberal education.

Small wonder, then, that leadership in liberal education has been lacking. Few university presidents, provosts, or deans over the last few decades have distinguished themselves by speaking clearly and forcefully to their universities, much less to the nation, about the character and benefits of liberal education.

Notable exceptions inspire. Under President Robert Zimmer, who served from 2006 until 2021, the University of Chicago promulgated exemplary [free speech principles](#). Mitch Daniels, Purdue University president from 2013 to 2022, [made a priority](#) of affirming Purdue's commitment to the Chicago principles and to liberal education. Ben Sasse, president of the University of Florida since 2023, embraced his university's [Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education](#) (on whose academic advisory board I serve), which "is devoted to research and teaching on Western civilization and the principles of a free society."

In "[Why Americans Love to Hate Harvard](#)," published in Harvard Magazine's March-April 2024 issue, Derek Bok weighs in on the state of higher education at Harvard and other elite colleges and universities and proposes a few reforms. Originally appearing in early January in the Chronicle of Higher Education and drawing from his new book, "[Attacking the Elites: What Critics Get Wrong – and Right – About America's Leading Universities](#)," Bok's essay

suggests that hostility to America's top universities arises in significant measure from sources external to higher education. While acknowledging that Harvard and many others have created faculties and curricula that are overwhelmingly progressive, his assessment greatly understates the accumulating damage to liberal education deriving from deliberate faculty and administration judgments, decisions, policies, and actions.

A storied Harvard figure renowned for judiciousness, Bok, now 94 years old, served as Harvard Law School dean from 1968 to 1971, Harvard University president from 1971 to 1991, and as acting president from 2006 to 2007. Perhaps his more than fifty years on the inside at Harvard explain both his sober insights into higher education and his confusion about the true causes and dimensions of the problems faced by leading universities.

One sees Bok's quest for balance and his failure to achieve it in his presentation of a paradox of higher education. On the one hand, he observes, America's elite universities elicit worldwide admiration, produce Nobel Prize winners, attract outstanding students, and receive lavish government financial support. On the other hand, "these same institutions are under intense attack from both ends of the political spectrum," Bok writes. "Liberals berate them for not doing more to enroll low-income students, pressure them to divest from companies that pollute the environment, and urge them to pay reparations for their complicity with slavery centuries ago. Meanwhile, conservatives – chiefly governors, legislators, and right-wing pundits – accuse them of indoctrinating students with liberal beliefs and paying excessive attention to the welfare of minority and LGBTQ students."

Bok obscures the asymmetry between the two sets of complaints while misstating the conservative side of the argument. Yes, the left charges that the university does too little to advance social justice. That, however, confirms the right's criticism that the left, which dominates campuses, puts progressive politics ahead of education.

Meanwhile, Bok wrongly asserts that conservatives typically fault elite education for "paying excessive attention to the welfare of minority and LGBTQ students." The gravamen of the conservative complaint does not reflect the bigotry that Bok implies but rather contends that elite institutions promulgate an ideology that is centered around claims of systemic oppression and demands for radical change, and which is disposed to punish those whose views differ.

Bok is on surer footing in reviewing the numerous trends over the past four decades that have increased outside interest in, and aggravated concerns about, higher education. The left seized on the surge in endowments – Harvard's skyrocketed from around \$1 billion during Bok's presidency in the 1980s to around \$50 billion today – to demand that universities use their enormous wealth to advance progressive causes. Big donors seek greater say in university policy. The boost in career prospects enjoyed by elite-university graduates intensifies competition for admissions. College-educated professionals clustering in the Democratic party want universities to help the less wealthy gain admission (Bok

disregards the priority that Democrats give to creating a racially and ethnically diverse student body) while Republicans, increasingly the party of the white working class, oppose affirmative action and progressive indoctrination. Universities lean more to the left which, Bok suggests, stems from liberals' stronger attraction to careers in the academy, though he himself gives ample reason to suspect that the accurate perception that they are unwelcome drives conservatives away from academic careers. Finally, the public's declining dissatisfaction with all major institutions in the United States magnifies discontent with higher education.

Bok's worries about growing government regulation of universities veer into special pleading. He laments, for example, the Supreme Court's 2023 decision declaring unlawful Harvard's use of racial preferences in admissions. While describing the decision as "only the latest in a series of cases in which judges displayed a diminishing trust in the academic judgments of universities," Bok ignores the abundant evidence that Harvard's admissions program violated the law by practicing racial discrimination.

In addition, he accuses Republican-appointed public university trustees of preventing the hiring of black candidates for university leadership positions. He implies, but provides no evidence, that racism is at work while neglecting to consider whether the opposition stemmed from an assessment of the candidates' views about education.

Bok also maintains that conservatives have gone too far in regulating the classroom and the higher-education bureaucracy. Occasionally they have, including in Florida. Nevertheless, Bok overlooks the principled conservative criticism of critical race theory and of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. The problem is not teaching CRT but presenting as an unchallengeable orthodoxy its central contention that racial discrimination in America is inextricably tied to the nation's founding principles and constitutional traditions. Moreover, conservative opposition to DEI programs, which often presuppose CRT dogma, stems from their distribution of benefits and burdens based on race and on ideological agreement.

Bucking the tide, Bok stresses that the left's domination of higher education deforms learning and teaching. "A problem that is especially difficult to correct is the predominance of liberal and liberal-leaning professors, especially in social science and humanities departments, where they often outnumber conservatives by 10 or even 15 to one," he writes. "As a result, there is an important body of conservative thought that is now nearly or completely absent on the faculties of many eminent universities." This gross imbalance in the faculty, which produces large holes in the curriculum, "is not ideal for educating students or for fruitful collegial discussion and disagreement within the faculty." Moreover, "in several courses that have been introduced in recent decades on subjects such as women's studies and race relations, the line between indoctrination and a simple statement of facts can be hard to draw."

To improve matters, Bok recommends strengthening offerings in civic education and moral reasoning – that is a step in the right direction – but ignores the dysfunction that pervades the curriculum, the classroom, and the campus: Harvard, for example, placed dead last among 248 institutions surveyed for [The Foundation For Individual Rights and Expression 2024 College Free Speech Rankings](#). Bok also proposes identifying and hiring conservatives, which would have the baleful effect of entrenching faculty and administrative authority to make appointments based on political beliefs. Instead, he should have emphasized the need for colleges and universities to teach thinkers such as Adam Smith and Edmund Burke and offer courses that explore topics such as diplomatic, military, and religious history – thinkers and topics in which conservatives tend to take a keener interest and acquire greater scholarly expertise.

The reform of higher education rests on the restoration of liberal education. Colleges and universities should place study of American ideas and institutions, Western civilization, and other civilizations at the curriculum's core. Colleges and universities should ensure that all classes – humanities, social sciences, sciences – and not just a select few foster robust intellectual give and take. And, as Harvard Law School Professor Randall Kennedy, a self-proclaimed man of the left, recently [argued](#) in the Harvard Crimson, colleges and universities should abolish mandatory DEI [statements](#) – like those endorsed by Harvard's [Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning](#) – because they chill speech and promote intolerance.

Since liberal education fosters the virtues of freedom, its restoration would also make an essential contribution to returning balance and sobriety to American politics.

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