



Recent Publications

BOOK REVIEWS

Bok, Derek. *Higher Learning*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1986. 206p. \$15 (ISBN 0-674-39175-6). LC 86-9876.

Derek Bok, president of Harvard University since 1971, has written a book that should be read by academic librarians and by those aspiring to be. It is for the most part not a memoir, but a series of reflections and suggestions about teaching students.

Bok's first chapter provides an overview of this country's higher education system, which he thinks differs from European institutions in three important respects. The first of these is the relative freedom from government control that our colleges and universities have enjoyed, public as well as private. In West Germany, for instance, the government can and sometimes does reject the university's choice for faculty appointments. The second distinguishing characteristic, and one receiving much emphasis throughout the book, is the extent of competition among American universities and colleges for faculty members, students, and funds, as well as in athletics. Such competition leads to well-publicized rankings of institutions, including "even libraries" (p.15). An interesting point is that, apart from athletics, the rankings of universities and professional schools have changed surprisingly little over the years, because in a large university power is dispersed among many semiautonomous units, and consequently it is not easy for the relative position of the institution as a whole to fall

or rise sharply. The third distinguishing characteristic of American universities is their responsiveness to a number of important constituencies—to faculty, alumni, students, prospective students, foundations, corporations, government agencies, and local community groups. In contrast, European constituent groups often ignore university administrators to take their cases to politicians and bureaucrats. Bok finds the advantages of America's decentralized and competitive system outweighing the disadvantages, although he is troubled that one significant result of our system is "the willingness to tolerate institutions of low quality" (p.28).

Most of the author's best observations are directed at undergraduate education. Bok provides an excellent overview of the major positions in the recurring debates over the shape of the liberal arts curriculum during the past century. Even better, he provides the astute and extremely rare critique of the curricular debates as largely irrelevant, because they give far too much attention to *what* students should learn and no attention to *how* they should learn. Faculty are among the most autonomous of professionals, and while they are willing to discuss what should be taught, they are much less hospitable to suggestions about how to teach and evaluate their students. "Hence, the fascination with curriculum, so typical of American undergraduate education, protects traditional faculty prerogatives at the cost of diverting attention away from the kinds of in-

quiry and discussion that are most likely to improve the process of learning" (p.71). Especially troubling to Bok is the fact that colleges and universities presently have no adequate tools to evaluate the effects of undergraduate education or of particular instructional methods. "The most basic need," he writes, "is to develop serviceable methods for measuring students' progress toward common educational goals" (p.67).

The book ignores graduate education, but a chapter is devoted to an interesting discussion of professional schools in law, medicine, and business. (Bok was dean at Harvard Law before he ascended to the presidency). Librarians will observe that some of the generalizations apply to library education as well. The subsequent chapter on "New Developments" focuses on continuing education, education for public service (with both of these themes being tied to professional education), and the "computer revolution." The greatest educational benefit of the new technology, Bok believes, is that as more teachers begin to use it, they are bound to think more carefully about the teaching/learning process. (Certainly in many libraries, the imminent arrival of automation has prompted an examination of basic assumptions about current procedures.)

In "Prospects for Change," his concluding chapter, Bok considers several developments in the social environment that help shape the agenda for higher education. Among these is the vast and rapid growth of knowledge, illustrated by Harvard taking almost 275 years to obtain its first million books and only five years to acquire its last million. As a result of the knowledge explosion, there must be greater emphasis on continuous learning, more active forms of instruction, and more thought-provoking examinations and written assignments. Most important of all, "universities need to make a sustained effort to investigate the process of teaching and learning and to evaluate its effects on students" (p.176). The book's last section examines the process of educational reform. Bok contends that reform of higher education is not going to come significantly from competition, from external

pressure, or from the faculty, who tend to agree with the proposition that "nothing should ever be done for the first time" (p.186). Instead, we need to rely on strong deans, provosts, and presidents, working with "a willing faculty" (p.197). Ironically, academics become deans and presidents and then have little time to pursue an intellectual agenda. "Instead, they must devote almost all their energies to the very administrative tasks for which they are so notably unprepared" (p.195).

Unfortunately, *Higher Learning* has few footnotes and no bibliography or "Suggestions for Further Reading"; it ignores research and graduate education entirely; it is not nearly so well organized as a whole as it is within its smaller units; and it is never clear about why reforms need to be undertaken, other than the obvious point that things could always be better. "In sum," Bok both observes and admits, "American universities do not face a crisis or a utopia (p.200). Nevertheless, the book is sufficiently insightful in its parts, and particularly so regarding our infatuation with curriculum, to make it an important item on the reading lists of all workers in the higher education industry.—Richard Hume Werking, Elizabeth Coates Maddux Library, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.

Newman, Frank. *Choosing Quality: Reducing Conflict between the State and the University.* Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, 1987, 121p. \$10.50.

Longtime leader and observer of higher education, Frank Newman, president of the Education Commission of the States, has in this brief work tackled the big and elusive problem of the pursuit of quality in the university. Rather than focusing solely on the university itself, Newman's thesis is that ultimately the achievement of quality depends upon a constructive relationship between state government and the state university and the intermediary structures such as the multicampus system office, the governing board, and the coordinating board.

The quality that interests Newman pertains to overall university performance—