



Universities and the Future of America

Derek Bok

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Since World War II, says the author, industrialized nations have come to depend so heavily on expert knowledge, scientific discovery, and highly trained personnel that universities have become “the central institution in postindustrial society.”

“If universities are so important to society and if ours are so superior, one might have thought that America would be flourishing in comparison to other industrialized countries of the world. Yet this is plainly not the case. . . . Our economic position in the world has deteriorated [and] we have climbed to the top, or near the top, of all advanced countries in the percentage of population who live in poverty, commit crimes, become addicted to drugs, have illegitimate children, or are classified as functionally illiterate.” In light of these results, “it is fair to ask whether our universities are doing all they can and should to help America surmount the obstacles that sap our economic strength and blight the lives of millions of our people.”

Having posed this question, Derek Bok reviews what science can do to bring about greater productivity, what professional schools can do to improve the effectiveness of corporations, government, and public education, and what all parts of the university are doing to help students acquire higher levels of ethical and social responsibility. He concludes that Universities are contributing much less than they should to help the nation address its most urgent social problems. “A century after the death of Cardinal Newman, many university officials and faculty members continue to feel ambivalent about deliberate efforts to address practical problems of society. And though competition drives university leaders and their faculties to unremitting effort, what competition rewards is chiefly success in fields that command academic prestige rather than success in responding to important social needs.”

Bok urges academic leaders, trustees, foundations, and government agencies to work together to help universities realign their priorities “so that they will be ready to make their full contribution when the nation turns its attention again to the broad agenda of reform. . . . Observing our difficulties competing abroad, our millions of people in poverty, our drug-ridden communities, our disintegrating families, our ineffective schools, those who help to shape our universities have reason to ask whether they too have any time to lose.”

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