AN INTERVIEW: Derek Bok

Derek Bok served as president of Harvard University from July 1971 through June 1991. His most recent book is "The Commercialization of Higher Education," published in 2003 by Princeton University Press. This interview took place in Bok's office on the Harvard campus, and was conducted by Kathy Witkowsky, a frequent contributor to National CrossTalk.

Kathy Witkowsky: In your book, you argue that increasing commercialization threatens to erode the values that are at the heart of higher education. But you also point out that profit-seeking isn't anything really new. What's different about today's educational landscape that has you so concerned?

Derek Bok: Well, I think two things are different since around 1980. One is that the amount of profit-making activity has increased greatly, in part because there are very pressing needs for funds and greater competition among universities that increase the demand. But the most important reason is that, as the society gets more complex, and there are greater needs for expert knowledge, new scientific discoveries, and mid-career education, which has boomed in the last 25 years, frankly, the opportunities to make money from the things that universities do have increased enormously. That's one change.

The other change is that profit-making activity has moved from the periphery of the university, in things like athletics or extension schools or correspondence schools, into the heart of what universities do: into scientific research, and now with the Internet and distance education, which can be established on a profit-making basis, into education as well.

KW: What do you think is at stake here?

DB: First of all, I'd like to make clear that this is not all bad. The opportunity to make money is sometimes a very useful incentive, not just in the private economy, but in higher education as well. The fact that universities since 1980 have been able to get patents on discoveries made with government funds has meant that universities have become far more active in trying to see opportunities, to translate the scientific advances that they make into useful products and processes. And that, after all, is why taxpayers have given us the money, and is certainly, therefore, in the public interest.

Nevertheless, it's very important how this process of profit-seeking goes on, because it can easily get out of hand and erode essential values of the university. The most vivid illustration, of course, is the form of commercialization that we've had the longest: athletics. You can see very clearly how big-time athletics has eroded the integrity of the admissions process, has affected the academic standards in the nature of courses, and sometimes even grading standards applied to athletes. What happens is those risks multiply when profit-making activities are not simply peripheral to the university but lie at the heart of what we do.

Dana Smith, Black Star, for CrossTalk

KW: Can you give me some examples, beyond athletics, of what turned on the warning lights for you about this commercialization?

DB: To begin with, it was the succession of get-rich schemes that came to me (as president of Harvard), and my recognition of how pervasive this problem was and how seductive a lot of these issues were.

For example, I mention in my book the proposal by a pharmaceutical company to give [Harvard] a million dollars a year, for the medical school to produce a series of programs on cardiology. We would control the content, but there would be commercial advertising. And the question is: Do you want to do that?

Well, it's very easy to make a case that that's easy money—take it. I mean, so there's advertising. There's advertising everywhere, including in the football programs at your own university. So what's the problem?

Well, the more you think about it, the more you see that turning education into a commercial product with advertising does have subtle costs connected to it that probably are best avoided. But at least to me, it wasn't immediately obvious that that was so. So I began to see: Gee, these are really tough problems. It's easy to make mistakes here.

KW: Do you distinguish between advertising on campus, or perhaps an exclusive contract with a company to sell its product on campus, and advertising or some sort of sponsorship, as you are speaking of, with these medical programs? Is there a difference there?

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DB: No, I think they're all part of the same problem.

Advertising is helpful in many ways to companies, and I'm sure if they could advertise in classrooms and things of that kind we could get money for it. You have only to see what has happened in high schools.

Many people aren't aware of the degree to which the desire to advertise has gotten into high schools—not only to get exclusive concessions, which of course always have bonuses for increasing the consumption of soft drinks and fast foods, but getting into the curriculum. So that you begin to provide math curriculum based on how many chocolate chips there

are in a bag of somebody's cookies, chemistry experiments on whether one brand of spaghetti sauce is really thicker than another, environmental courses based on the life cycle of a well-known athletic shoe. These are curricula that are actually in use in high schools as we speak. So we should not minimize the threat that this poses or the ingenious guises in which it can come.

KW: So, left unchecked, how far do you think this trend toward commercialization in higher education could go?

DB: Oh, I fear it could go pretty far. Again, one can look to athletics as an example of the process that has gone on for many decades. And certainly the fact that compromises have been made with values that most people would say are very fundamental—your admissions standards; your grading; the nature of your curriculum; and the fact that academic officials have acquiesced with those compromises—makes you believe that there are dangers that we need to look out for, and that it would be rather foolish to assume that somehow because it's higher education and we have high motives and lofty purposes that we are not going to get into trouble if we don't watch ourselves.

KW: Is some of that compromising going on now?

DB: Yes, there's enough so that you can see the problems very easily. There are certainly cases of excessive secrecy. There are cases in which there have been corporate efforts to manipulate published academic research. There have certainly been instances of conflict of interest in which people had financial interest in the outcome of the research that they were carrying out.

We're at an earlier stage in education-for-profit via the Internet, but as you see universities partnering with venture capitalists who expect to make a large return from the money that they put into distance education via the Internet, one can expect that decisions by some institutions for Internet education will be driven more by their moneymaking potential than by their capacity to enhance the learning of students. And those two are not the same. And profit-making efforts in education may in some circumstances produce high quality education, but there will be other circumstances in which it does not, and students will suffer as a result.

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KW: How can you distinguish between the profit motive that is beneficial to education and the profit motive that is detrimental to education?

DB: That, of course, is the trick. And I don't think I can give you a single formula. I think there are a series of categories of behavior. You have to look at each one and try to draw some guidelines.

I do point out in the book that simply looking at each situation as it arises on an ad hoc basis is almost certain to get us into trouble, because the benefits are real and immediate, and the costs are much more intangible, long-run, not easily attributable to any single decision. And so you're bound, bit by bit, to slip into the same sorts of problems that you have in athletics.

So you do need guidelines. But there isn't a single guideline that can be applied to all situations.

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I think you have to be very careful about what your values are and then apply them to each category, such as secrecy, or conflict of interest in scientific research, or profit-making ventures in education, and then you try to draw some lines.

KW: Who should be ultimately responsible for ensuring the academic integrity of each educational institution?

DB: At present, the responsibility lies very heavily in the hands of the president or the top very few officials at the university. And I believe that that is unwise, because the president is under enormous pressure to raise money. He or she is often judged on how much money they raise. And as a result, without some greater support from other constituencies in upholding the essential values of the institution, I fear that this process of erosion is bound to take place—just as it has in athletics.

So I believe there is a role for the trustees to play, not just in paying attention to how much money we're raising, but by paying a lot of attention to how we're doing it: not by getting into the micromanaging details of each research contract, but by making sure that there's a careful review of corporate research to make sure that there are appropriate guidelines for secrecy and conflict of interest, and by doing their best to make sure that key officials, like the technology transfer officers, know that they will be rewarded as much for retaining values as they will for earning money.

I think, if anything, even more important is the engagement of the faculty. There's a very dangerous tendency at work now to say that the faculty is sort of an obstruction—that in today's fast-moving economy, universities cannot tolerate the delays and obfuscations of faculty, and that the creative administration has to be agile and move quickly and therefore needs more authority, and the faculty should be kept out of these things. I think that's fatal.

KW: As you point out, the president has a very important role here. As these financial pressures come to bear on universities, do you think that we are now entering an era in which we're hiring presidents more for their business savvy than for their understanding of academics?

DB: Absolutely. And I think to some extent it's inevitable: Universities are much bigger and more complicated institutions than they were, and therefore administrative skill is more important than it was.

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are able to spend less and less time on the internal academic side of the institution. And in the end, they remain academic leaders. And I don't think we will have distinguished leadership by people who are disengaged from the process of teaching and learning and discovery and scholarship that is the heart of what we do.

KW: How big a role do you think government should and will play in the future of higher education's relationship with the marketplace?

DB: I very much hope that we can do a good enough job of policing ourselves so that the government doesn't have to come in and do it. And I don't say that as a sort of knee-jerk conservative reaction to government. I think that government is essential in many spheres of life.

But I don't think that [legislators] do as a good a job as really careful universities could do in drawing lines—in part because they don't know so much about education, in part because institutions are so different that trying to make uniform lines from Washington is almost bound to create really awkward and unworkable situations on some campuses. And of course, because the administration of government rules is very time-consuming, with lots of paperwork that inevitably results in mistakes that sometimes can be quite harmful.

KW: It seems like one thing government can do, as you suggest in your book, is provide stable financial support. How important is that?

DB: Stable institutional support is important because if there are sudden drastic declines in support, a campus will grow desperate. The cries of pain from students with lower scholarships, and professors whose programs are yanked out from under them, are sufficiently intense that people are simply not going to pass up any opportunity they can find to exploit new sources of funding. And it's when you act in that way, out of a sense that, "I'm doing this for survival," that talk of preserving essential values and so forth is going to go down the drain, because those values are intangible, they're long-term, they simply can't stand up against an acute need for funding now in order to avoid inflicting real pain and damage to the institution.

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KW: So what is the solution to this slide into commercialization?

DB: Like most things in life that matter, eternal vigilance. You have to be aware of the problem; you have to try to establish safeguards in the form of guidelines; you've got to try to create incentives and job descriptions that make it in people's interests to adhere to those guidelines and to respect those academic values. And you need to engage the different constituencies of the university in some appropriate way, so that you don't simply look to one or two individuals who have extreme pressures on them to do the whole job.

And if you do that, you could probably do a pretty good job of resisting these problems. If you don't, I think it's pretty likely we're simply going to go the road we have in athletics.

KW: Are you optimistic that this trend can be halted or reversed? And how much has been sacrificed already?

DB: I think we're in an early enough stage that nothing is irreversible in the areas of education and research, which are the areas that really matter. I think the problem with athletics is largely irreversible. I think we can make some improvements, but I don't think we can ever overcome our problems completely. So that's a kind of warning lesson: Don't let it go on too long.

Fortunately, in education and research, the process is much younger, and I don't see anything being irreversible. So if we are aware of the dangers and begin to pay more attention to resisting them, although we can never achieve perfection, I think we can do a pretty tolerable job of keeping our difficulties within bounds. ◆