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Higher Expectations: A Review

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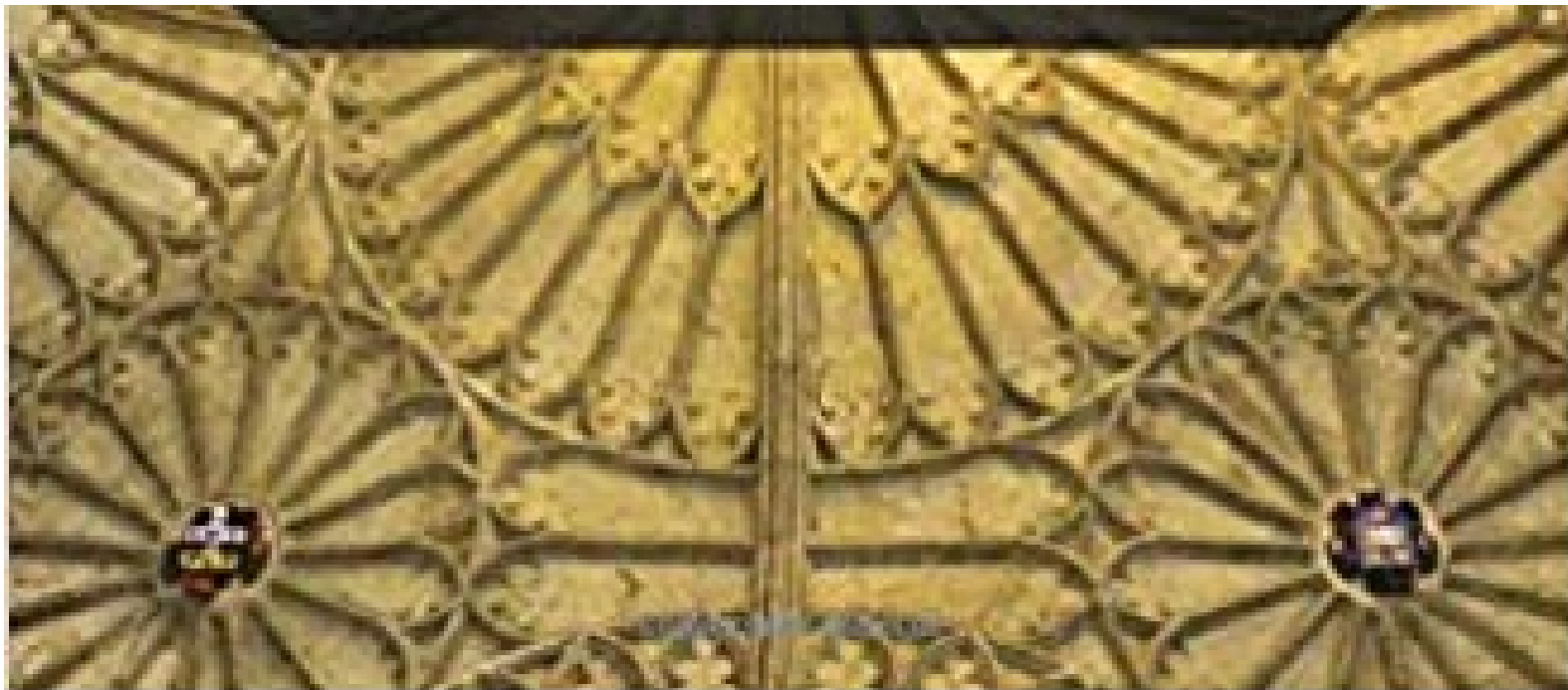
HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

CAN COLLEGES TEACH STUDENTS WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

DEREK BOK

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Higher Expectations: A Review

Derek Bok. 2020. *Higher Expectations*. Can Colleges teach students what they need to know in the 21st century? Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Can colleges do more? Derek Bok, who is emeritus professor at Harvard University after having served for decades as dean and long-term president, argues that colleges should offer a kind of comprehensive education that involves training students in a range of skills and qualities that help them contribute to society and live flourishing lives. Such skills and qualities include resilience, empathy, creativity, problem-solving, the ability to work with others, to participate in community and politics, to be responsible, to hold strong ethical principles, and to have a clear sense of purpose.

While reading the book I could not help but think that Dutch university colleges are on the right track, and are offering much of the kind of comprehensive education that Bok proposes. Dutch university colleges provide significant room for educational innovation, classwork often involves team-work, small classroom discussions train critical thinking and problem-solving, many colleges include courses that involve intercultural competences and media literacy, and there is significant attention to the ethics of social and racial justice and protecting the environment. Furthermore, most colleges offer community service projects, undergraduate research opportunities, capstones, student government and extracurricular activities. There is also a high level of student care through the tutoring system and the involvement of resident assistants and student life officers.

Even so, there are good reasons to pay attention to Bok's book. Bok helps us recognize what colleges do well, but also what colleges can do better. The present circumstances – think the pandemic and growing concern over the mental health conditions of undergraduates – mean that students today have a greater need for the kind of comprehensive education that Bok advocates. Moreover, Bok's approach is fueled by insights from psychology and neuroscience, and pays particular attention to empirical research on the effectiveness of educational reforms. As such, *Higher Expectations* is an inspiring resource for future pathways in educational research at the college level.

Bok's 'higher expectations' refer to the skills and qualities that enhance students' lives. He argues that whereas most psychologists assumed that creativity, empathy, resilience, conscientiousness, sociability, and other personality traits were largely fixed by early childhood, recent research has shown that these qualities change significantly, at least through early adulthood. Studies in neuroscience, for example, show that "the part of the brain that controls executive functions and provides for self-regulatory maturity changes significantly during early adulthood" (70). To these findings we could add the research in developmental psychology (cf. Jeffrey Arnett) about emerging adulthood, which points to the tendency of

young people in post-industrial societies to postpone the typical decisions that define adulthood – such as buying a house, deciding on a career path, getting married – to their early thirties instead of their early twenties. And we could add the literature on Generation Z (cf. Jean Twenge) that argues that, due to their online existence, the current generation of students is actually more mentally vulnerable than the previous generation. These developments result in increasing demands on college life and curricula.

Bok articulates four main categories of skills and qualities that colleges can help develop: character, purpose and meaning, interpersonal skills (collaborating with others, understanding diversity, etc.), and intrapersonal skills (resilience, creativity, a willingness to engage in lifelong learning). The first two of these categories are perhaps the most novel in the contemporary discourse on higher education, and I will spend some time on each.

First there is the turn to – or return of – character. Bok notes that in the mid-twentieth century, American colleges moved away from shaping the moral and religious character of students. However, he argues that advancements in developmental psychology and voices in the popular discourse – referring, amongst others, to New York Times columnists David Brooks and Kwame Appiah – indicate that something is missing from a college education that ignores character. The tide has turned, Bok argues, citing a recent study in which more than 80% of undergraduate teaching faculty agree (strongly) that it is their role to develop students' moral character and help them develop personal values (60).

Bok's practical and empirical approach goes a long way to dispel lingering ambivalences about the cultivation of character as a goal of college education. He addresses the relevance of courses in moral reasoning and the arts in general for promoting good character traits such as moral decision-making, empathy, and creativity. Furthermore, he helps articulate how the enforcement of rules involving academic honesty and student behavior provide pedagogical opportunities. He stresses the importance of supporting students in a good work ethic, helping them to cultivate personal responsibility and habits of self-control. Last but not least, he emphasizes the importance of professors and university administrators to set examples by adhering to high ethical standards. "College, after all, fills the lives of undergraduates during a period of years in which they have an unusual capacity for growth in personal responsibility and habits of self-control while living in an environment that offers them exceptional opportunities to discover, clarify, and apply the values they wish to live by" (58). More work is needed, according to Bok, to understand how colleges can support students in the development of character, and to develop more reliable ways to measure the overall effect of undergraduate education on the character of students (65).

Secondly, Bok picks up on the literature that argues that colleges have a role in helping students to develop personal values that give purpose and meaning to their lives. He notes that students who have a clearer understanding of 'what it is all for' tend to have greater resilience and motivation for their studies. This is called "self-authorship", that is, "the ability to act on one's own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings" (85). Helping students to become the authors of their own lives seems a high call for anyone, but Bok notes two educational initiatives that seem to have an effect. The first is close to my heart, namely, great books courses that open up the question of 'what living is for'. The second is an initiative at Stanford University to develop a 'designing a life' course (90 ff.).

Higher Expectations highlights a range of practical educational initiatives for how university colleges can continue to respond to the personal and psychological needs of students and the demands made by society, politics, and the economy. His discussion, in particular, boosts the relevance of the liberal arts as fundamentally important for "the achievement of goals such as becoming an engaged citizen, acquiring strong ethical principles and the empathy to act on them, developing personal values and lifelong interests, and understanding and respecting others of different races, cultures, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background" (144). Higher Expectations is timely, and a worthwhile read for college researchers, educators, and administrators alike.

By [Emma Cohen de Lara](#) | November 19th, 2020 | Categories: [Book reviews](#) | [Comments Off](#)

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