Review of *Higher Education in America* by Derek Bok. Princeton University Press. 479 pp. $35.

In Francis Cornford's satire, *Microcosmographia Academica* (1908), the dons in Great Britain dismiss a proposal to change traditional practices at their college because "Nothing should ever be tried for the first time." This principle, the late Irving Kristol once claimed, applied to higher education in the United States as well. "With the possible exception of the post office," Kristol wrote, the university has been "the least inventive (or even adaptive) of our social institutions since World War II."

Comments like these are common, Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard University, acknowledges. But, like much of the conventional wisdom about colleges and universities, positive and negative, they're wrong. In *Higher Education in America* Bok draws on the latest empirical research to set the record straight about systems of governance, undergraduate education, doctoral programs, medical schools, law schools, and business schools, teaching, research, and tenure, tuition, financial aid, affirmative action, the role of government, inter-collegiate athletics, online education, for-profit institutions, and what he calls "matters of genuine concern." Comprehensive, judicious, probing, and immensely informative, written for students, parents, and taxpayers as well as "insiders," it is one of the best books to appear on this subject in decades.

Bok's overall assessment of higher education in the United States is positive. He indicates that since World War II colleges and universities have adapted well to changing circumstances. They absorbed more than two million veterans in the 1940s and early '50s, diversified their undergraduate populations in the '60s and '70s, commercialized scientific discoveries after the passage of the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980, and are now making good use of online technologies. The current state of research in universities, Bok claims, "seems free of serious weaknesses." And professional schools "continue to be unsurpassed and widely admired throughout the world."

Nonetheless, Bok finds plenty of problems in higher education. All too often, he asserts, universities engage in costly, complicated, and unnecessary activities. Intercollegiate sports, in his view, is one of them. Another is ownership of teaching hospitals, a function that "others could perform as well.

Two problems, Bok emphasizes, are in need of urgent improvement: raising the (now stagnant) percentage of young Americans who complete a college degree and improving the quality of undergraduate education. The first "would be a steep hill to climb under any circumstances," but is especially challenging when money is in short supply - and Bok offers no feasible solutions. He realizes that the second requires substantial curricular and pedagogical reforms that may well be resisted by faculty.

Bok points out, for example, that undergraduates do not make good use of electives, and recommends that they be cut back. Although the lecture is the least effective method of developing deep comprehension or higher-level thinking, he writes, it remains the most common approach instructors use in conducting their classes. And most disturbing of all, the proficiency in reading and quantitative skills demonstrated by college graduates "leaves a lot to be desired." Technology, Bok suggests, may help faculty members and administrators address all these problems. And he believes that quantitative assessments of writing, critical thinking, and other skills may be valuable, if tests are not "imposed from above and accompanied by rewards and punishments."

Bok also has some provocative things to say about research. Summarizing studies that show that 98 percent of published articles in the arts and humanities, 75 percent in the social sciences, and 25 percent in the sciences are never cited, he condemns the practice of basing evaluations of faculty on the number of books and articles they produce and suggests that publication be encouraged but not required for tenure and promotion.

On the other hand, Bok refutes the assumption that engaging in research undermines teaching. Professors who publish a lot, it turns out, do not teach fewer introductory courses, or give more multiple-choice exams, or spend less time preparing for class, or hold fewer office hours than their less productive colleagues.

The external risks to higher education, Bok concludes, "are more threatening today than they have been in the past." Support among the general public has diminished as tuition has risen faster than inflation; government may enact damaging regulations or cut funding for research and financial aid. Other nations, moreover, are pouring money into their universities.

Nonetheless, Bok chooses to be more optimistic than many of his fellow academics. Advances in technology, more effective
methods of instruction, and a willingness to try new things, he concludes, could help educate "the larger and more diverse cohorts of young people now entering college while enhancing the learning of existing students as well."

On one issue, it seems to me, Bok is surely right: "it would be unwise to take the preeminence of our universities for granted. Like nation, academic institutions can start to decline at the very time their status in the world stands highest."