A campus conversation between Former Harvard President Derek Bok & Executive Editor Frank Shushok Jr.

Frank Shushok, Jr., Virginia Tech
On December 20, 2013, About Campus Executive Editor Frank Shushok Jr. talked with Derek Bok about his new book, Higher Education in America, and his thoughts about the past, present, and future of higher education in the United States, especially related to student learning. Read on for the fascinating discussion.

By Derek Bok and Frank Shushok Jr.

About Campus Conversation
between Professor Derek Bok and Executive Editor Frank Shushok Jr.

Shushok: Thank you so much for speaking with me, Professor Bok. Your voice in higher education has long been admired by About Campus readers. I enjoyed reading your new book and found its comprehensive nature helpful, challenging, and, ultimately, hopeful. I was particularly grateful for your treatment of the subject of student learning, something especially important to our readers. I would like to begin our conversation today, however, by talking about criticisms currently being directed at our colleges and universities. Almost every day there's a new editorial, book, or politician critiquing American higher education. As you survey current themes, what are critics getting right, and where is the conversation off course?

Bok: I believe that several of the criticisms are right. One is that the financial model for many colleges and universities has become unsustainable; we can’t go on raising tuition substantially and more rapidly than family income. I think it is generally correct that the quality of undergraduate education is not as good as it should be. It’s also true that dropout rates are too high and we need to improve them. I regret to say that I believe that selective colleges are not doing as much as they should to attract low-income students and give them an opportunity, if they are talented enough to meet admissions criteria. Certainly, I think that intercollegiate athletics are a disgrace in the United States.

On the other hand, there are some criticisms of higher education that to my mind are quite wrong. One is that universities are extremely conservative and unwilling to change rapidly enough. There is some truth in that as far as teaching methods and curriculum are concerned, but in most respects universities have adapted quite well to a succession of large challenges. Of the nine universities that were founded before the American Revolution, all are still among the top 100 universities in the country. That would be very hard to explain if they were as sluggish and unresponsive to new opportunities as critics often claim.

I think another false criticism is that professors don’t care enough about teaching and are more interested in their research, when actually there are a lot of international surveys that show that professors care more about teaching in the United States than in almost any other country. I think the common criticism that tenure is an obstacle to progress is quite wrong, and that abolishing tenure would create as many problems as it would solve. Finally, I reject...
the school of thought that says that shared governance, whereby faculties work with the administration on matters pertaining to education and research, is working badly. To the contrary, the data show that on a large majority of campuses shared governance is in quite good shape.

**Shushok:** Much of your recent book, *Higher Education in America,* emphasizes undergraduate education and posits hopeful reforms to strengthen it. As you consider the broad landscape of higher education, what specific efforts do you believe are most likely to bolster student learning?

**Bok:** I would emphasize three changes as being the most important for improving the quality of our education. The first is that there should be less lecturing and more active forms of learning. Lectures chiefly serve to convey information, but that should be done through textbooks and readings, supplemented by videos of lectures given by world-famous professors. Class time should be used to train students’ minds by teaching them to apply information and knowledge, through using their powers of reasoning and analysis to answer questions and solve problems. This would do much more lasting good than professors sitting on a stage and telling students what they ought to know.

The second change is that we should make greater efforts to measure the results of our teaching, simply on the theory that if you don’t know how effective any human activity is, it’s very hard to improve it. That is true in almost all walks of life, and certainly is true of undergraduate teaching.

Third, I believe that it is very important to incorporate more training of our PhD students—our future faculty—to prepare them to be teachers as well as researchers. The body of knowledge about how to teach, about curriculum reform, about the uses of technology in the classroom are building a solid body of knowledge about teaching. This knowledge is critically important and needs to be conveyed to future faculty. We cannot continue to expect doctoral students to pick up this expertise on their own after they graduate and get their first faculty position.

**Shushok:** You’ve said “we treasure what we measure,” noting that higher education has not been particularly effective measuring student learning. How are we doing in this regard, and why have we continued to struggle to do this well?

**Bok:** We have to recognize at the outset that there are limits to measuring student learning because there are some important goals in undergraduate education that are extremely difficult to measure. Most colleges claim that they are attempting to develop the character of their students, in other words, their ability to observe and maintain high ethical standards in their life. Colleges always say they are preparing active lifetime learners and developing self-knowledge in students. All those aims are important, but it is extremely difficult to measure them. I think we have to acknowledge that under the best of conditions, we are not going to be able to measure everything.

There is a great deal, however, that can be measured reasonably well about student learning and the effectiveness of our educational programs. We are doing more to measure, of course, and there is a lot more useful data being collected now than in the past, largely because accreditors have been pushing colleges to clarify their educational objectives and evaluate how well they are being achieved. However, although much data are being collected and piling up in administrative offices, it is much more rarely used to talk with the faculty about the weaknesses or deficiencies in the undergraduate program and how to find ways of improving.

If you ask why we aren’t doing more with the data we are collecting, I believe there are two very clear reasons. One is that the faculty members do not like to be evaluated. That’s not peculiar to faculty; few people enjoy having their life’s work evaluated, and the faculty is no exception. Some people don’t even like to go to doctors to get checkups because they are afraid of what they are going to find out when someone really looks carefully at the state of their health. If you have spent your life trying to teach students, the idea that someone is going to come in “from the outside” and tell you whether you’re succeeding or failing is to many faculty members a disquieting thought, and they resist.

The other problem with using assessment data is that college presidents and top college officials today are very concerned with developing the image and reputation of their institution. As a result, they worry that if they collect data and share it with faculty, the information is going to leak out and be publicized. Since no educational program can truly live up to all the brave claims that are made for it, publicizing that

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**Derek Bok** is the 300th Anniversary University Research Professor at Harvard University who served as the twenty-fifth president of Harvard from 1971 to 1991, and again as interim president from 2006 to 2007. His earlier books include *Our Underachieving Colleges, Universities in the Marketplace,* and *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College University Admissions.* Professor Bok’s support of training and resources to promote better teaching and student learning is reflected in his namesake, The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (aboutcampus@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.
One of the treasured experiences in the life of many college graduates is the fraternity and sorority system, but I fear that this system can actually work against diversity because members of fraternities and sororities often tend to attract people very like themselves.

information may put the institution in a bad light and perhaps make it more difficult to attract able students to apply or to impress donors and the general public about how well the institution is performing. So presidents don’t want to antagonize their faculty, but they also worry about the results of making measurements public and harming the reputation of their institution.

Shushok: When you think back to your 2006 book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, has your perspective changed in any particular way since its publication?

Bok: Yes, I think the most important change is that in the last five or six years since I published the book, there has been a noticeable growth of interest in how well we teach and how much our students are learning, and there also has been an increase in the amount of information about how effective our teaching is. As a result, there is a slow but perceptible increase in the amount of work that is being done on campuses across the country to try to improve things. Now, the pace of progress seems quite slow and gradual to me, and it would be a good thing if the rate of improvement could increase, but I am more hopeful today than I was five or six years ago. Slow as it is, the trajectory is definitely in the right direction. We are doing more to think systematically about our deficiencies and to experiment with new ways of overcoming them than we used to do, and that is a very good thing!

Shushok: A frequent theme in your writing and in your leadership at Harvard has been the important connection between diversity and student learning, especially in undergraduate education. Could you offer us a report card of our collective efforts to use America’s diversity as a pedagogical tool on college and university campuses?

Bok: I believe that colleges and universities have done a good job of diversifying their student bodies and thereby increasing opportunities for minorities while helping all students to develop a greater understanding of racial differences. Beyond that, it is difficult to generalize. Some colleges, particularly residential colleges, have done a very good job of bringing issues of diversity into the curriculum and using the residential experience to have a diverse student body learn to live together. By eating, studying, and sleeping in the same building, students come to know and understand racial differences far better than they otherwise would have. On the other hand, there are a number of institutions where the job is much more difficult because they are not residential campuses, and students are often commuters. They come to college and are mixed together in classes, but outside of classes they often remain quite segregated.

Numerous colleges have introduced programs to try to increase racial awareness. Some of them are orientation programs, some of them are actual courses on race relations, and some are departments such as “Afro-American Studies.” It is hard to generalize about these programs. On many campuses they have been a real success, but on other campuses the programs are weak.

For example, orientation programs aimed at increasing racial understanding have often become an exercise in indoctrination and political correctness, which has not been helpful. In short, there is still work to be done, but I think that overall, we will look back on the last two or three decades and view our efforts to diversify our student bodies and make that part of the learning experience as one of the bright spots in the evolution of American higher education.
sororities often tend to attract people very like themselves. Instead of promoting an understanding of diversity, Greek organizations can, in essence, work against it by dividing people into groups who are noted for their similarities more than for their differences. I think that’s one thing we should try to address.

I also believe that building up a strong department of Afro-American studies or Hispanic studies, for example, can be valuable if it’s done well. Few undergraduates may major in such a program, but a great many students will take at least one or two courses, and therefore enjoy a learning experience about different races and the part they have played in American history and society, which is very valuable.

Finally, we need to consider our specific efforts, through orientation programs and otherwise, to increase racial understanding. While some of them have not worked out well, there is good evidence that many of them do in fact increase people’s racial understanding, provided we make sure that they do not degenerate into indoctrination. Finally, we need to work in every way to build diversity into the lives of students. We do that very well in athletics, which are often the most diverse activities that occur on campus. Although there is a lot about athletics that I disapprove of, I do think one of its unintended by-products is to bring people of different races together in a very intense activity from which many of them have learned and gained a lot in terms of their racial understanding. If this process could be incorporated into other social and extracurricular experiences of students, it would be a very healthy thing. It is a continuing challenge, but the evidence suggests that we are making slow but steady progress.

Shushok: Knowing what you know now after such a distinguished career in higher education, and assuming you had the time, energy, and money to create a college or university that would model an education needed for the twenty-first century and beyond, what would you create? How would it be organized? What would students learn? Who would attend? What would it cost?

Bok: That’s a very big question! I will use it to make one point that I think is very important. I would reject the idea that there is any one ideal institution that we should all aspire to create. I think one of the glories of American higher education is that it is so diverse in the kinds of institutions we have, the kinds of students they serve, and the way we go about trying to help those students. Out of that comes a number of different models that are doing different jobs, each of which is important. There are community colleges, which can take poorly educated or low-income students and equip them for good careers and rewarding lives—those institutions are extraordinarily important. There are research universities to discover new knowledge and provide an exceptional wealth of opportunities for students to experience and learn. Liberal arts colleges can provide unusually intense residential experiences and dedicated teaching. Those are just three examples of many other variations on the theme of student learning, and all of them are important.

I think that if I were to be put in charge of a community college, I would see opportunities to improve student lives and make a constructive difference that would be different, but equally challenging and important to presiding over a research university, which I did for some twenty-one years. The challenges are very different, but it is hard to choose among them, because they can all make a great and positive difference in the lives of human beings. I’m going to resist the invitation to describe the ideal college, because there is a dangerous tendency in American higher education to think in hierarchical terms. Too often, the ambition is to move up the hierarchy: if you’re a community college to become a four-year college, if you’re a four-year college to become a four-year college with a strong research program, and ultimately to become an MIT or Stanford or something equivalent and rise to the top of the US News ranking. Such aspirations undermine the needed effort to accomplish many diverse things in our society. It is as if all our automobile companies adopted the ultimate goal of producing Cadillacs. Such aspirations do not serve the needs of higher education in this country.

Shushok: That is a fair response. Good for you for resisting the form of my question! Still, are there purposes that transcend the diversity of colleges and universities?

I think one of the glories of American higher education is that it is so diverse in the kinds of institutions we have, the kinds of students they serve, and the way we go about trying to help those students.
We need to make a more conscious effort, not to make our classes more “popular” in some superficial way, but to present students with interesting problems that will engage them in intellectual exercises that really develop their minds.

Bok: I think all these types of institutions ought to be trying to improve the quality of education they provide in order to serve their students better. And there certainly are some common goals. They all need to work harder and more conscientiously at identifying strengths and weaknesses of their educational program in terms of how much their students are learning. Having identified weaknesses, how can we develop new and creative ways of improving? Then, how can we try and test those, and through a process of enlightened trial and error, gradually improve the amount of learning that goes on at our campus? If I were to found any new institution, I’d want to assemble a faculty interested and eager to approach the education of students in the way that professors traditionally approach their research. In other words, I would expect them to identify the important questions that need to be answered, then to gather evidence systematically to try to come up with the most enlightened and plausible solutions they can, and then put their conclusions into practice. I believe I would be working in much the same way at any of these institutions, even though the clientele they serve and the way they go about their work would differ considerably depending on their mission.

Shushok: My next question is more pragmatic. Readers of About Campus include faculty, policymakers, student affairs professionals and a broad range of colleagues interested in improving undergraduate education and strengthening student learning. Since many readers are “in the trenches,” so to speak, what are the sorts of daily choices we can make that will ultimately improve quality?

Bok: Perhaps I could begin by speaking in terms of what individual faculty members could do. I would recommend that professors do less lecturing and develop different forms of teaching that are more active; more concentrated on teaching students how to collaborate with others, and how to apply their knowledge in useful ways to solve problems that matter. In general, faculty should challenge students to think carefully, creatively, and constructively, instead of just having them record the thoughts and information that are communicated to them in a lecture.

The second thing I would recommend is to find ways to make classes more interesting and engaging. We have a real problem at present motivating students to take learning more seriously. Although many professors may not realize it, they are engaged in competition with some very smart people who run companies, either as television producers, computer game designers, or developing social media, texting, Twitter, and e-mail applications. They are all trying to capture more of the time and attention of students, and they are winning! The evidence that we have suggests that students are spending a lot less time on their classes than they did 40 years ago. I’m sure part of the reason is that these competitors have developed so many beguiling ways of capturing the attention of students. We already have a lot of evidence to show that students come to class and put their computer up in front of them, and during the lecture they engage in checking their e-mail, texting their friends, or some other electronic diversion; the same is true when they study. Because they are frequently distracted, in class and out, by various forms of intriguing entertainment, the amount they learn is bound to diminish.

We need to make a more conscious effort, not to make our classes more “popular” in some superficial way, but to present students with interesting problems that will engage them in intellectual exercises that really develop their minds. I also believe we need more challenging standards. Grade inflation, for example, has become a real problem that not only affects students’ motivation but has reduced the credibility of a college diploma and a college transcript in ways that are damaging us. If faculties don’t do something to maintain more credible standards, other people are going to try to do it for us, and that could do a lot of mischief and cause the faculty a lot of pain.

I also think individual faculty members could do more assessment in their own classes. I know professors who have given simple tests to their students at the beginning of the course and at the end of the course and found some surprising things about how much their students are actually learning. These results have led to constructive changes in the methods the professor employs. So you don’t have to wait for the institution to conduct institution-wide measures and assessments. There is a lot
of assessment you can do in your own class so you will begin to have a better sense of what your students are learning. You can also accomplish a lot by using technology in your teaching, which both improves the quality and interest of what you are teaching, but also can give you a lot of data about what aspects of your instruction are succeeding and what aspects of your course are causing difficulties for students.

In all these ways, the improvement of teaching has to be improvement on the part of the faculty, and does not depend on an institution-wide effort. Many professors would find such efforts rewarding. As I mentioned, I’ve had one or two professors, who are also very successful scientists, who did notable work of this kind in improving and changing their own methods of teaching. They told me they gained as much excitement from using their own classes as a kind of laboratory to discover better and more effective ways of helping students learn as they did making scientific discoveries in their own laboratories. Clearly, there is a real opportunity here for doing something that will be interesting to professors, and in the long run very helpful to students in improving the quality of education.

Shushok: Another major portion of our About Campus readers are people who are committed to student learning and work outside the classroom, so they might be people who work in residence halls or student activities or academic advising. Do you have some thoughts about their role in this whole student learning enterprise?

Bok: Yes, they all potentially make a contribution, and often a very important contribution, not just to keep the institution running but to improve the lives of students in all sorts of ways. It is very hard to generalize because the types of work they do are so diverse, but I’m sure for all of them there’s a way to examine the effectiveness of what they do, and become more aware of where improvement is needed and how to achieve it. For example, in the admissions office, there is a problem in selective institutions because they are not doing enough to attract talented students from low-income families. How do you reach those students, and how do you get them to apply so that you build that kind of diversity and provide that kind of opportunity for more students?

In the academic advising area, there is an opportunity to try to help improve retention rates, which are much too low in many colleges. There are all kinds of ideas developing now for using technology and other methods for identifying students in danger of dropping out at an earlier stage, when they can be more effectively helped, and for improving the quality of advising in other ways. For example, we know that the average undergraduate takes one more semester to complete college than is really necessary to achieve the number of units required, and one reason for this is that students don’t realize what courses they need to take in order to qualify for graduation. As a result, students lose a lot of money in tuition and opportunity costs.

Another group, the financial aid office, needs to figure out how to make the financial burdens of the college less onerous and difficult for students. These are all challenges, but they need to be met in order to make substantial improvement in the quality of the undergraduate experience, and increase the numbers of people who actually benefit from it and end up earning a degree. The point is that we all have a role to play, and the opportunities are endless!

Shushok: Finally, Professor Bok, we’d love to hear how you are spending your time and what you are thinking about these days now that your book is done.

Bok: To begin with, at the age of 83, I live at a slower pace—I should acknowledge that at the outset! Having just written a rather comprehensive book, my ambitions are more modest than they might have been 30 years ago. At the same time, I continue to be fascinated by the issues of higher education and continue to read about different aspects that interest me. I’ve been thinking a lot about this phenomenon called “competency-based learning,” which is gaining a lot of popularity. I’m also very interested in all the ways in which technology is changing and capable of changing higher education, some of which are frightening, and others very exciting.

As a former law professor and a law dean, I’m also very interested in the problems of law schools,
which now have about the highest tuitions of any school I know of in the universities, and are finding that many of their graduates are not able to find legal jobs at all, or at least cannot find legal jobs that pay enough to enable them to discharge their students loans. Those are big problems, and I’ve been interested in reading about how law schools are trying to deal with them. Perhaps I will write articles if I think I have some ideas about these subjects, which might be useful. But for now, having just published this book, I am quietly gathering information and waiting to see whether ideas occur to me that are worth sharing with others.

Shushok: This has been extraordinarily helpful. Thank you again for your generosity and the gift of your time. It is much appreciated.