

## REVIEWS

# The More Things Change . . .

*Is College Worth It? A Former United States Secretary of Education and a Liberal Arts Graduate Expose the Broken Promise of Higher Education*

by William J. Bennett and David Wilezol  
THOMAS NELSON, NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, 2013

*Higher Education in the Digital Age*

by William G. Bowen  
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, PRINCETON AND OXFORD, 2013

REVIEWED BY: MARK F. SMITH

The imminence of fundamental change is one of the constants in analyses of higher education. The first sentence of Clark Kerr's preface to the 1963 first edition of *The Uses of the University* was "Universities in America are at a hinge of history: while connected with their past, they are swinging in another direction." In 1994, Kerr wrote in the fourth edition that he was "convinced that we are again changing course."<sup>1</sup> However, not all change is worth supporting, and the need to distinguish between useful and damaging types of change will be essential for faculty and staff unions in the coming years.

The two works under review here offer change we cannot quite believe in, yet still provide food for thought about both immediate approaches to current problems and the fundamental purposes of higher education. William Bennett and

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David Wilezol use far more pugnacious rhetoric, while William Bowen takes a much calmer and reasonable approach, but both stress Kerr's conventional wisdom that higher education is at a critical turning point, and neither recognize the necessity for faculty leadership on academic decisions. W.E.B. DuBois once wrote that, "The function of the university is not simply to teach breadwinning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a polite society; it is above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization."<sup>2</sup> Such goals seem utopian in today's discourse about colleges and universities, and despite contrasting approaches, in the end both books come down agreeing that the purpose of higher education is "to teach breadwinning."

Bennett is a former Secretary of Education, and Wilezol is an associate producer of his radio show, and a graduate student at Catholic University. Their book criticizes almost every aspect of the current scene, resembling nothing so much as an op-ed on steroids. But not all the complaints are unwarranted: students do face too much debt, published rankings of institutions are not helpful, appropriate work should be available after graduation, and administrative pay is too high (especially in relation to faculty pay, admittedly not an aspect that Bennett and Wilezol consider).

In their main thesis, Bennett and Wilezol flatly deny the "conventional wisdom that everyone should go to college" suggesting we should "only encourage it for those who are prepared—financially, educationally, and mentally."<sup>3</sup> They do concede, "if you get into Stanford, no matter what you study, you should probably go" but they consistently argue that only the few are qualified for higher education.<sup>4</sup> While their approach might superficially resemble DuBois' "talented tenth," they clearly do not share his vision of education's evolutionary possibility. And they clearly favor limiting college to those financially able to attend, knowing, of course, that most people of color have lower income levels.

Bennett and Wilezol suggest that most prospective students should look at options to a baccalaureate, but in the process repeat a confusion, endemic in the literature, over what one means by "higher education." On the one hand, they discuss the variety of institutions, but in their recommendations suggest "attending community college" as an alternative to going to college, making it clear they are envisioning the residential four-year college.<sup>5</sup>

The authors correctly criticize published rankings of colleges and universities, arguing that comparing institutions without considering personal preferences makes little sense, but then rest their argument on a comparison of institution's 30 year return on investment (ROI) using data from PayScale.com, "an online resource for salary and benefits information." Of the top ten colleges in terms of ROI, all are private institutions, and eight are engineering or Ivy League institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Bennett and Wilezol repeat the tired argument the expansion of student aid drives tuition increases, with the former claiming credit for what he modestly calls

“the Bennett Hypothesis, as I (Bill) first articulated in *The New York Times* in 1987.”<sup>7</sup> Bennett explains, “that the cost of college tuition will rise as long as the amount of money available in federal student-aid programs continues to increase with little or no accountability.”<sup>8</sup> After touting his originality in 1987, he proceeds to complain the “problem went largely unnoticed until the recent economic recession.”<sup>9</sup> For a more persuasive explanation of why tuition and fees skyrocketed, see William Zumeta’s article “Higher Education Enters a New Era” in NEA’s *2013 Almanac of Higher Education*, which argues that “state policymakers allowed public colleges and universities to replace some tax revenues with sharply higher tuition and fees.” Zumeta points out that, “this shift from taxes to student and family payments goes back several decades, with the sharpest movements occurring after recessions.”<sup>10</sup>

Bowen’s volume, based on his 2012 Tanner Lectures, is both more modest in its aims, and more satisfying in its execution, especially in his discussion of costs, the subject of the first lecture. He argues that higher education suffers from a cost disease. Along with certain other undertakings like the arts, you simply cannot get the same kinds of productivity savings manufacturing does. To illustrate, Bowen quotes Robert Frank contrasting the real productivity savings in automobile manufacturing with the fact “it still takes four musicians nine minutes to perform Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, just as it did in the 19th century.”<sup>11</sup>

The second (and more controversial) lecture discusses the potential for online education to address the cost disease. Bowen argues that online learning is “not by itself” a fix, “but it can be part of an answer,” and it shows “great potential.”<sup>12</sup> He calls for systematic solutions that take institution wide approaches, rather than department level approaches.<sup>13</sup> While insisting that “faculty involvement is essential,” he states that “this is not the same thing as giving faculty veto power over change.”<sup>13</sup> This argument is a pragmatic one to ensure that predetermined change happens, not a principled argument to ensure faculty involvement in the original decision. While most faculty would deny they were seeking “veto power over change,” they do believe that some means of enforcing faculty involvement are critical. Decisions having such far-reaching effects on the academic nature of the institution must be made as educational decisions, not simply as business decisions.

Both books make the assumption that because the current reality is not what it should be, the system needs new and more managerial intervention. A different set of assumptions would draw on the voices and practices of the educators who work directly with students, in order to ensure that the new and efficient methods actually provide the quality higher education that students need. Such an approach would reconnect the practice of higher education in our larger democratic ideals. As John Dewey wrote in 1939, “Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. Since the process of experience is capable of being

educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. All ends and values that are cut off from the ongoing process become arrests, fixations. They strive to fixate what has been gained instead of using it to open the road and point the way to new and better experiences.”<sup>14</sup>

In the end, both these books help focus the challenges facing a serious discussion of academic change that features faculty leading student learning. While many faculty will understandably dismiss Bennett and Wilezol as an overly politicized and simplistic argument that seeks to turn American higher education back to a time when only the right people were involved, that would be a mistake. Too many of the criticisms in *Is College Worth It?* are shared throughout the policymaking world to simply dismiss it. And while Bowen’s arguments are well crafted and more sympathetic to the academic viewpoint, they are still fundamentally administrative approaches that put business considerations first and academic concerns second.

Faculty unions need to address the very real cost issues inherent in higher education, yet persuade the public and policymakers of the critical importance of academic decision making to maximize instructional effectiveness and enhanced student learning. Rather than unilaterally imposing commercially driven policy alternatives, administrators need to work with faculty empowered to use all available tools, technological or otherwise. In that way, together they can successfully transform the nature of higher education, increasing access and affordability, while retaining the quality of the educational experience. Because DuBois is right: the goal really is “to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.” <sup>nea</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, Fourth Edition, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. xiii, viii.
2. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003, p. 64. (The book was originally published 1903.)
3. Bennett and Wilezol, pp. 76-7.
4. *Ibid*, p. xiii.
5. *Ibid*, p. 165.
6. *Ibid*, pp. 103-4.
7. *Ibid*, p. 21.
8. *Ibid*, p. 21.
9. *Ibid*, p. 22.
10. William Zumeta, “Higher Education Enters a New Era,” in *The NEA Almanac of Higher Education*, 2013. Retrieved from: [www.nea.org/assets/docs/2013\\_Almanac\\_Zumeta.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/2013_Almanac_Zumeta.pdf).
11. Bowen, p. 4.
12. *Ibid*, p. 70.
13. *Ibid*, p. 65.
14. John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” in *The Essential Dewey. Volume I: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, 1939, pp. 343.