

## **Have a Good Four Years**

Speech delivered at Harvard University, Sep. 18, 1971

Derek C. Bok

There is a popular notion that a college education is something to be endured in order to become certified to obtain certain kinds of jobs or go to graduate school. This is not what we are trying to do at Harvard, nor would we wish to have many students here who took such a narrow view of a college career.

There are several goals we aspire to reach in our undergraduate program.

The most obvious one is to give knowledge--fairly concentrated knowledge in one field and a more general knowledge of a variety of other subject areas which you may choose. But if acquiring knowledge is a self-evident part of a college education, it is far from the most important. Remarkably few of the facts you learn here will remain in your memory for many years, and some of those that do will be discredited by new knowledge. So if we were to concentrate on conveying information, we would give you something fleeting and impermanent.

Instead, we have looked to other things we can give that will last a little longer. Among these things are certain habits of mind--the capacity for more critical analysis, for more accurate and logical use of information, the ability to derive useful concepts and generalizations, to find and process data, and so forth.

In addition to these methods of thought, it is our hope that we can instill certain attitudes of mind--a willingness to accept ambiguity, uncertainty, and the lack of definite truths; a sense of the complexity of human affairs and the variety of human experience that comes from history and literature; an independence of thought, a respect for facts and for the uncomfortable conclusions to which facts sometimes lead.

Beyond giving these intellectual qualities, a college should try to lay a foundation for the creative use of leisure time. Some of this capacity can be stimulated in the classroom--in courses in the humanities and the arts. Yet at least as much stimulation will occur outside the lecture hall--on athletic fields, in music rooms, student theaters, concert halls, and so forth.

These, then, are some of the aims of a liberal college education as I see them. I cannot resist concluding with a few private thoughts about our new careers at Harvard.

To begin with, I hope that we will think broadly about what we want to accomplish here. It would be tragic for you to set your sights on some limited goal such as getting high grades or merely

getting into one or another graduate school, just as it would be unfortunate for me to settle for simply preparing students to find comfortable, prosperous jobs.

Second, I hope that you will give some thought to what you can do for others during your stay here. There are many problems waiting for your help, many people who could profit from your efforts. Nothing can take the place of the contributions to be made by working directly with individuals whose problems are immediate and elemental.

Third, I hope that we will enjoy ourselves hugely in the next few years. And when we cannot--when we endure the inevitable anxieties, the frustrations, the bewilderment about ourselves and what we are accomplishing--I hope that we will remember in one small corner of our minds that these moments of frustration and bewilderment are often indispensable to our well-being, for they are the spurs that push mind and spirit to some new and greater conception of ourselves and the world around us.

Like all useful things, anxiety and frustration can be carried to excess, and this leads me to a final bit of advice. Whatever else we do, let us remember not to take ourselves too seriously. However great our problems may seem, however urgent our complaints, they are dwarfed by the predicament of countless other people on our planet. The world is filled with self-important, obsessive people. Let us not add to the number lest we become too preoccupied to enjoy the opportunities around us, too self-indulgent to appreciate the needs of others, too overcome with the weight of our responsibilities to meet them freely and creatively.

Have a good four years.