



## NOT SHYING AWAY: BILL BOWEN ON LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In *Lessons Learned: Reflections of a University President* (Princeton University Press, 2010), William G. Bowen WF '55 urges presidents “to say clearly and forcefully what you believe on important university-related matters. It is unwise to equivocate too much or shy away from controversy.”

Over the course of nearly five decades as a leader in higher education, Dr. Bowen has not shied away from controversy. Both during his tenure as president of Princeton University and in his subsequent roles, he has been a bold, even insistent leader and commentator on some of the toughest challenges facing higher education, from coeducation and diversity to the cost of college to digital education. The last of these is the subject of his latest book, *Higher Education in the Digital Age* (ITHAKA/Princeton University Press, 2013).

Dr. Bowen, an Ohio native and the first in his family to attend college, received his Woodrow Wilson Fellowship as a senior at Denison University. He completed his Ph.D. in economics at Princeton in just three years, joining the Princeton faculty as a labor economist. His early work included a monograph, *The Economics of the Major Private Universities*, that essentially predicted the financial crisis higher education would confront in the last three decades of the 20th century. Appointed the university's first provost in 1967, he became president in 1972 and held that post until 1988.

It was an eventful two decades at Princeton. As provost, Dr. Bowen facilitated the university's shift to coeducation, with the first women admitted in 1969, an initiative that provoked considerable resistance; he also spearheaded efforts to enroll more minority students. As president, he oversaw the creation of Princeton's residential colleges, made a set of strategic investments in life sciences, and expanded the physical plant, all amid the fiscal constraints of the 1970s; he also raised substantial funds, with the endowment more than tripling during his tenure. He wrote reports on fiscal management in higher education that, circulated by the American Council on Education, would become models for institutions nationwide.

His transformational role in higher education continued after Dr. Bowen left Princeton in 1988 to head the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, where he brought his legendary drive and breadth of perspective to bear on a range of new challenges. One Princeton faculty member told *The New York Times* in 1987, “I don't know how he will turn his new position [at Mellon] into a 20-hour-a-day job, but if anyone can, it's Bill.” To better inform Mellon's grant making, he developed a research program that would examine and project needs in education and the nonprofit world. He also,

with considerable technological foresight, guided the Mellon Foundation's sponsoring role in the creation of the searchable JSTOR and ARTstor archives.

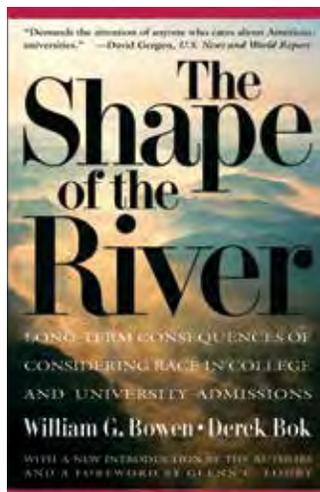
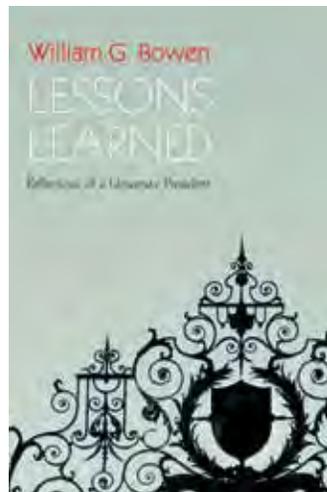
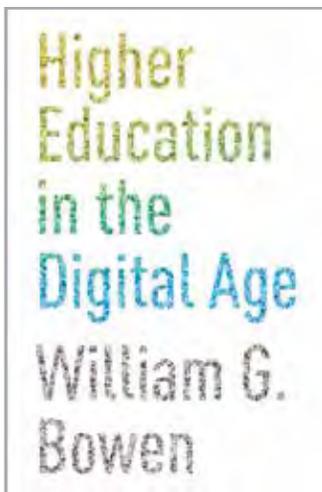
During his Mellon years, Dr. Bowen also produced some of the best-known of his more than 20 books on education and policy. With former Princeton and Mellon colleague Neil Rudenstine, subsequently president of Harvard University, he co-authored *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.*, a definitive study of doctoral education and its outcomes, as well

as the effects of shifts in the need for and production of Ph.D.s. His analysis in the book would support the often-contentious notion that some institutions could and should pare away doctoral programs, given “excess capacity” in the system. With former Harvard president Derek Bok, he wrote *The Shape of the River*, still one of the best-known examinations of the impact of affirmative action on higher education, and one in which he did not shy away from the controversial suggestion that colleges should indeed consider race in admissions, as a means of achieving the significant educational benefits of a diverse campus. Dr. Bowen's other books—including *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* and *Crossing the Finish Line*, on college access and college completion, and *The Game of Life* and *Reclaiming the Game*, on college athletics and educational values—have staked out clear positions on key issues with similar forthrightness.

With what seems to be his characteristic prescience, Dr. Bowen has written most recently about the effects of technology on higher education, and about its implications for costs, access, and scholarly production. *Higher Education in the Digital Age* harks



Photo: David Lubarsky



Photos: Courtesy of Princeton University Press

back to his early work on the economics of higher education—specifically, to his definition of the “cost disease” of higher education. In the 1960s Dr. Bowen had argued that, unlike many industries, labor-intensive enterprises like higher education would always see rising labor costs outstrip any incremental increases in productivity, the “outputs” that any one faculty member (for example) could provide for students. The phenomenon is at the root of current debates about the rising cost of higher education and its effect on access for students from middle- and lower-income backgrounds—along with such factors as inefficiency and competitive spending on amenities to attract students.

MOOCs and other digital interventions might, in Dr. Bowen’s analysis, offer a true means of changing productivity in higher education, enabling one faculty member to teach more students digitally and, at the same time, freeing more in-person time for research, writing, and student advising. On the other hand, he argued in the 2013 Stafford Lecture at Princeton, a rush to embrace new digital forms of learning could prove counterproductive:

...[T]here is much to be said for an intelligent division of labor, with those especially well-positioned to do so constructing sophisticated platforms with feedback loops, and with user campuses demonstrating at least modest capacity to customize offerings on the platform(s). We do not need a thousand versions of a basic/customizable platform; nor should we expect every campus to start from scratch in preparing its own online materials. Some wheels do not need to be re-invented.

And here, he acknowledges, is the sensitive point from which, as ever, he does not shy away—“a pervasive

problem in higher education that no one wants to talk about.” Just as not every institution needs a doctoral program in every field, Dr. Bowen observes, not every institution needs to be a producer of online or digital content, and some may actually contribute more as skillful consumers and packagers of content. The alternative “portfolio” approach, he argues, could imply different types of learning and teaching at different institutions in ways that are cost-effective for those institutions and their students.

His knack both for framing the debate and for guiding implementation has made Dr. Bowen one of the best-known and most widely respected higher education leaders of the past half-century. The citation for his 2012 National Humanities Medal (see page 13) emphasizes his strengths as both a visionary and an administrator: “While his widely discussed publications have scrutinized the effects of policy, Dr. Bowen has used his leadership to put theories into practice and strive for new heights of academic excellence.”

For all his gifts in analyzing the economic forces that shape higher education and the economic force that they, in turn, exert on society, Dr. Bowen ultimately sees colleges and universities as “symbols of continuity,” he writes in *Lessons Learned*. “They are long-term creators of knowledge and understanding, with each generation benefiting from the work of its predecessors as it, in turn, presents new challenges and opportunities to the next.”

Few leaders of the past half-century have done as much as Dr. Bowen to advance that generational transfer of knowledge. [WW](#)

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