

**Review of *Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education*,  
William G. Bowen And Michael S. McPherson; Princeton University Press,  
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**A Lesson for Ireland?**

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The recent death of one of the authors of this text, William G. Bowen; President Emeritus of Princeton University at the age of eighty-three brought to the fore the work he undertook as a university leader in raising the study of higher education and its institutions as an author, coauthor, and editor of books. There are many Princeton University Press titles that bear his name and as president of the Mellon Foundation he published (with Julie Ann Sosa) *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences* in 1989. Though, nearly thirty years on, he is more closely identified with other, later works, it was this book that initiated the parade of publications that to many people's minds the analysis of higher education particularly in North America. Indeed, the publication of *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*, which made the evidence-based case for affirmative action and influenced higher education policy was cited in 2003 US Supreme Court case upholding affirmative action.

Bowen's last book, *Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education*, published by Princeton University Press in 2016, was co-written with his close colleague and frequent collaborator Michael McPherson- a former President of Macalester College. It offers a blueprint for addressing the central issues now facing colleges and universities in the United States, and touches upon the areas of educational attainment, completion rates, socioeconomic and racial inequalities, affordability, student aid, efficiency, sports, teaching, technology, and leadership. In outlining their "agenda for change," Bowen and McPherson blend optimism with quiet renewed determination:

There is much that can be accomplished. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his famous *Democracy in America (1835)*, observed: "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults." However true this may have been in the

early part of the nineteenth century, we fervently hope that it is true today.

The concise discussion presents material in a condensed and readable format without glossing over the research and application of most recent data to clarify on each of the issues raised and propose solutions. The framework constructed acknowledges the lack of ease for academics, administrators and legislators in making sweeping change but suggest that without this it will not be possible to meet the USA's future demands.

The central issues addressed in this text are replicated in debate in the wider global higher education environment and none more so than in this country. The questions raised lead one to query if higher education has failed and the very public service role of higher education. Having a public service role means serving the needs of the society and culture both directly by the provision of knowledge and skills that aid the employability of students and indirectly by improving quality of life. The correct balance between direct and indirect benefits cannot be decided in the abstract because it is programme-specific whether in the arts and humanities or the STEM disciplines.

The discussion in particular on the financing of higher education is enlightening in providing a mirror on the known issues to be addressed in Ireland. The future funding of higher education and the options being considered arising from the Cassells Report and the ongoing parliamentary committee work could draw from lessons to be learned in Part III of Bowen and McPherson's text.

It is clear that the Irish higher education system has evolved dramatically in recent years. Much of the discourse on higher education is too abstract and much of that discourse is dominated by people who I would suggest are quite far from the centre in terms of their thinking on economic and sociopolitical matters. Defining the purpose of higher education is no easy task and yet in this text, it is acknowledged that the fact is that it has lots of purposes. Above all when people discuss education, they need to recognise that education has many functions and when discussing it we need to deal in specifics such as staff development, enabling strong leadership, encouraging diversity; and not stay safely in the abstract. The addressing of the seemingly mundane as highlighted in particular in Part II of this text can serve to act as a force for change debunking as it does the common misperceptions prevalent in higher education worldwide in a healthy and provocative manner.