

Interview

Continuing to Change

An Interview with The Honorable Bob Kerrey, President, The New School



The Honorable Bob Kerrey

EDITORS' NOTE Bob Kerrey has retained his current post since 2001. Kerrey served as a governor and U.S. senator from Nebraska during the '80s and '90s. He leads a five-year writing challenge sponsored by The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges and is Co-Chair with Newt Gingrich of the Alzheimer's Study Group. He also co-chaired the National Commission for Quality Long-Term Care. He is a recipient of the Robert L. Haig Award for Distinguished Public Service from the New York State Bar Association, an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from New York Law School, as well as the Distinguished Nebraskan Award. Bob Kerrey was educated in pharmacy at the University of Nebraska. He served three years in the United States Navy. After his military service and prior to entering political life, he started a chain of restaurants and health clubs in Nebraska, Iowa, and Kansas.

COMPANY BRIEF Greenwich Village, New York-based The New School (www.newschool.edu) is a progressive university composed of eight schools bound by the intention to prepare students to bring positive change to the world. The New School offers its more than 10,200 undergraduate and graduate students 82 graduate and undergraduate degree-granting programs, as well as certificate programs and more than 650 continuing education courses to more than 6,400 adult students every year.

How do you define the mission of The New School?

The first tradition that sets us apart is reaction against the traditional organization of a university. The founder broke away from Columbia to do non-credit education, no degrees, no tenure, no endowment and to put together a faculty to deliver lectures to audiences in the belief that the most important education in the country is to educate people who are already educated.

The second tradition came about in the '30s as a consequence of the father of the first President, Alvin Johnson, telling him as he was growing up, "If you ever find yourself in the presence of somebody who is Jewish who needs help, you better help him, because I'm alive and you're here because a Jewish peddler helped get me out of Denmark during the war." So when the National Socialist Party came to power, Johnson – through the Rockefellers and others – joined the Emergency Rescue Committee and founded what became known as The University in Exile. That European Frankfurt school connection is very strong here in the tradition of critical research that was born of that affiliation. They started doing for-credit degree Ph.D. programs.

The third tradition is bringing the world of art and design together with the world of politics, social science, and science. These three elements are connected to the most important thing about The New School, which is our location in New York's Greenwich Village.

Is it getting harder to differentiate as you're becoming more traditional?

Yes. It's becoming more difficult because there is a tendency in life to be more liberal in your head than you are in your actions, and to embrace change for others but not for yourself, particularly if you are worried about job security. Change becomes difficult, but unless we continue to change, we'll just become a smaller version of NYU.

Has technology detracted from the human element in teaching?

Today, unless you're producing content that is strictly e-mail based as opposed to full motion streaming video and sound, you're not losing that human element. Technology is essential, not only in the online world, but also in getting good software searches and more of the content, like publications in digital form. We have to invest in that because it's what many of our faculty and students want. And our research shows that you can produce at least as good a result.

Many suggest that the U.S. is still among the strongest in the world in terms of university education, but there is a need for reform for K through 12. Do you agree with that, and why has it been so challenging?

I don't think it's broken, but it's important to observe the difference in governance between the university level and the K through 12 level. The higher education system is very decentralized and very competitive for students, faculty, and money.

In education, the government is a big deal. And despite all my love of democracy, it has limits. My board isn't elected. The more you're able to select the board based on competency, the better off you are. In the K through 12 system, it's still 90 percent public, 10 percent private; it's decentralized, but decentralized into a government entity, not into private entities. Even a public university is competitive – a lot more competitive than a school district is. For all of its downfalls, competition generally produces higher quality at a lower price.

The fact that we have 14,000 or 15,000 elected school boards is one of the biggest problems we have with our educational system – it's not very competitive.

Are you concerned that the U.S. is losing its competitiveness to the likes of India and China?

I do worry about it, and a piece of it is, in some ways, we've lost our collective nerve, and we're demanding too much security.

One of the things I've managed to do since I've come here is to read some very interesting stories about this region – one of them is about the Erie Canal. If you wanted to build the Erie Canal today, it would be impossible. We wouldn't build it. It's not just the cost – it's the risk associated with the project.

I'm not sure tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt could do today what he did then. I don't want to sound like a right-winger but, at some point, the desire for security is counterproductive.

Should universities play a bigger role in addressing societal issues?

You have to be judicious about it. Your primary responsibility is to lead a university. Particularly where the mission is to transfer knowledge, you have to be careful that you don't send a signal that it has to be a certain kind of knowledge. There is already a problem in higher education with people presenting a political point of view rather than allowing the students to decide and express their own points of views. So you have to be very careful. ●