Book Review

The quiet crisis: How higher education is failing America

Peter Smith

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In *The Quiet Crisis*, Peter Smith sounds the alarm loud and clear: American higher education is a boiling frog. It is outdated and ineffective and has the responsive qualities of a ranid gradually reaching ebullition. In other words, according to Smith, higher education is in trouble, and no one seems to know or care enough to do anything about it. If anyone is qualified to sound this alarm, it is Smith. He is a consummate educator. He has served in various administrative positions in higher education, including as founding president of two institutions. He has also served on the boards of numerous national education organizations and has held various political offices, allowing him to directly influence education policy. So one can read *The Quiet Crisis* and be confident that the perspectives offered are informed.

The premise of *The Quiet Crisis* is pretty straightforward: higher education is failing. In making this point, Smith invokes the concept of

cultural capital. He writes in compelling fashion about how race and socioeconomic status significantly affect an individual's chances of success in higher education. He presents statistics that illustrate how at every stage of the educational process, large numbers of poor students and students of color are lost. The grim statistics prompted Smith to re-characterize the proverbial pipeline as that of a sieve, with the poor and the non-white passing through its filters in startling numbers.

According to Smith, failure to educate those who arguably need this 'bridge to opportunity' the most transcends moralistic bounds and presents Titanic risks to the nation as a whole. For the foreseeable future, blacks and Latinos will make up 80 per cent of the increase in the college age population. And the economic costs of failing to educate these populations are estimated to be \$225 billion. As Smith aptly argues, an educational aristocracy is not in our best economic interests.

Smith proposes fixing higher education through a multifaceted evolution of age-old assumptions and methods. He proposes harnessing new knowledge and new technologies to facilitate a new student-focused educational experience, tailored to the diverse populations the system must serve. According to Smith's 'emerging learning ethos,' teaching and learning flourish when lessons are tailored to students' learning styles and are relevant; when the entire community is used as an educational setting; when diversity is embraced; and when quality is an output-based measure. He proposes a system where a learning diagnostic, akin to a medical physical, is performed on every student. This diagnostic would inform the method of delivery and content of each student's course of study. And as each student passes through the educational system, a 'learning passport' will follow, validating the student's 'experience, skills, and ability.' Although he describes the learning passport as a 'mobile transcript,' Smith makes it clear that it would encompass all learning, whether done in a classroom or elsewhere. Remember the ethos. The entire community is a learning setting.

The Quiet Crisis does an effective job of describing the challenges facing higher education and society. Smith restates many of the same arguments throughout the book. I am loath to criticize his repetition because as the old saying (that I just made up) goes, one man's tautology is another man's consistency. However, *The Quiet Crisis*, though a great read, does warrant some criticism. Anecdotes pepper the book, giving it robust flavor; but outside of the statistics

relating to graduation rates, the book is decidedly ... anecdotal. To his credit, Smith forestalls this criticism by stating his lack of desire to engage in 'statistical warfare.' But given the certainty with which he writes, some of his arguments beg for statistical buttressing. For example, he touts the service-learning program at CSU-Monterey Bay, where he was founding president, but provides no data on outcomes related to it. Has it improved retention among 'at-risk' students? I would surely like to know.

Smith gives scant attention to the ways in which higher education has already begun to evolve. Nontraditional forms of education are becoming commonplace. Schools are arguably embracing diversity to an unprecedented extent. And a growing number of institutions, like Northern Kentucky University, are offering college credit for prior work and volunteer experiences. These are all developments that comport with Smith's emerging learning ethos, though he largely ignores their emergence.

Some of Smith's proposals are based on assumptions that are as rosy as they are incomplete. Smith is an ardent believer in the power of education credentials. Smith, however, ignores the fact that these credentials derive much of their tangible value from their relative scarcity. A society where everyone possesses a college degree will not all of a sudden lose all semblances of strata. And while I am not arguing against universal college completion, I am arguing that the attainment of such would do little to fundamentally change economic strata in this country.

Smith also proposes a national system of accreditation that would be awarded to schools demonstrating high levels of outcome-based success. Smith argues that this heightened level of accreditation 'would democratize status and prestige,' as if Bowling Green would ever be considered an equal to Harvard. Smith's description of his proposed learning passport fails to discuss how it would be functionally different from traditional transcripts. Certain types of 'experience, skills, and ability' would still be preferred over others, just like certain grades and courses of study are now preferred. And the heightened focus on learning styles, through the learning diagnostic, could have an insidious downside. There seems to be little doubt that no matter how many times Howard Gardner says no

learning style is superior to another, institutions and employers would still prefer certain learning styles over others. Would learner style discrimination become part of our lexicon?

In *The Quiet Crisis*, Peter Smith puts us on notice: our system of higher education is a boiling frog, a blocked artery and a sieve that is in danger of going the way of the mighty mastodon and the 'unsinkable' Titanic. Smith's goal is for *The Quiet Crisis* to be 'a critique and a policy primer'. And in this sense, it is a success. Now, who's going to turn off that alarm?

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