

Book review

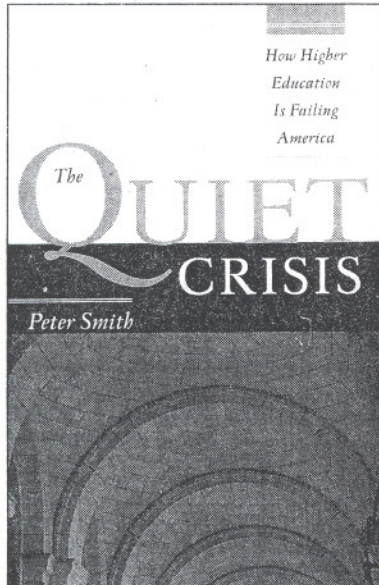
'Quiet Crisis' short on solutions for colleges

Throughout "The Quiet Crisis," Peter Smith criticizes the way that higher education has stubbornly, and even arrogantly, opposed any attempt at true transformation, preferring instead to perpetuate an outmoded system that he sees as destined to be dismantled in favor of new approaches to learning that are inherently more utilitarian.

In many respects, Smith has the proper credentials to speak meaningfully about higher education in America. He was the founding president of two institutions, the Community College of Vermont and California State University-Monterey Bay. He's spent most of his career in the educational arena, which gives him considerable credibility with regard to his grasp of the relevant subject matter.

But as is often the case with would-be educational reformers, the problem is not that Smith is inherently wrong with many of his assumptions and assertions. The difficulty comes when he talks about solutions; i.e., implementing corrective action within the context of a productive and systematic plan. Toward this end, Smith could have provided a better road map — one that more clearly spells out what he thinks needs to be done in a concrete and substantive manner.

Basically, Smith argues the academic model that's driven American higher education for most of its history is no longer viable and needs to be replaced, the sooner the better, with a new model that can more effectively and efficiently respond to societal and economic changes precipitated by increasing cultural diversity. To support this thesis, Smith points to many leaders in business and industry who seem to be growing more and more impatient with both the process and the product of most of the nation's colleges and universities.



The Quiet Crisis: How Higher Education is Failing America, by Peter Smith. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, 2004, 174 pages, \$ 39.95 (cloth).

"The Quiet Crisis" consists of 10 chapters divided into three sections which reflect Smith's basic themes. The first theme relates to how "success" is defined in educational institutions and how this has led to confusion in attempts to demonstrate quality. Smith asserts any definition of academic quality must take into account the impact on the life of the individual learner. Smith argues a new definition of quality is emerging in academia that reflects evolving economic and cultural realities. And this, he says, has implications for how we ultimately hold institutions accountable.

The second theme revolves around the notion that colleges and universities, as they are currently configured, are having a deleterious effect on the learning process. Smith notes a new "learning ethos" is emerging, one in which colleges and universities should see themselves as "a bridge to opportunity, not a device to weed out people." Smith reflects on the generally accepted premise humans have the capacity to learn in different ways. By contrast, higher education has traditionally reflected a "one size fits all" mentality in its approach to the learning process.

The third theme espouses Smith's belief that technology is the primary key to resolving the issues precipitated by his first two themes. Smith observes the way today's students learn is affected by their exposure to technology from birth and that institutions of higher education are slow to acknowledge and adapt to this reality. He notes that technology "will allow us to reach new populations and employ new knowledge about learning with new effectiveness and unimagined quality."

So what does Smith think should be done? Like so many educators who write books like "The Quiet Crisis," the author is much better at describing the problem than explaining what should be done about it. In general terms, he talks about an overall plan that would include creating new reward systems recognizing the inherent value of change and experimentation, making higher education more accessible to an increasingly diverse population, improving philosophies of, and approaches to, financial assistance, and reforming the way colleges and universities are accredited.

On several levels, there is merit to what Smith advocates in "The Quiet Crisis" with respect to transforming higher education so that it is more responsive to, and in line with, the needs of the greater society in which it exists. But is it equally true that colleges and universities are already engaged in countless initiatives, both individually and collectively, aimed at responding to the issues Smith outlines.

"The Quiet Crisis" is not a bad read. It is written in relatively plain language (as opposed to educational jargon) and Smith does a good job of providing appropriate documentation, illustrations and examples. But it must be read from a critical perspective; not everything Smith writes can be taken at face value. A lot can be learned from "The Quiet Crisis" — just not necessarily what Smith intended.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, professor and head of the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University