

'Crisis' offers unique insights on reforming U.S. education

It is clear what's wrong with higher education. The only question is whether we have the vision and the will to fix it before it is too late."

So says Mark C. Taylor at the conclusion of his latest book, "Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities."

Taylor is chair for the Department of Religion and co-director of the Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life at Columbia University. He was named National Professor of the Year in 1995 by the Carnegie Foundation for his application of technology to the higher education arena. He has a Ph.D. in religion from Harvard and is a frequent contributor to the New York Times as well as several other prestigious publications.

"Crisis on Campus" consists of nine relatively short chapters and can easily be digested in one or two sittings. Taylor's narrative approach and literary style make his book accessible to a general audience, although those more intimately familiar with academia will obviously appreciate the implications of his observations and interpretations in a more comprehensive and utilitarian manner. The volume is both a wake-up call to those who work in academic circles as well as an effort to heighten awareness among the general public regarding the perils that lie ahead if colleges and universities continue on their present course.

Taylor sees the origins of most of the problems higher education is currently facing in the social and political upheaval of the 1960s. "There is no doubt that the urgency of the social protest in the middle and late sixties was inspired by the threat of military draft for privileged college students," Taylor writes. "I was fortunate to have several professors who insisted on a close relationship between the abstract philosophical and religious ideas we were exploring in the classroom and the concrete social and political events going on beyond the confines of the university."

Similarly, Taylor views the ongoing conflict between idealism and realism – or more precisely, between increasingly skewed educational priorities and continually evolving market circumstances – as being fundamental to any credi-

CRISIS ON CAMPUS



A
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Mark C. Taylor

"Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities", by Mark C. Taylor. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, 240 pages, \$24.

ble attempt to explain our current dilemma. The parallels Taylor draws between today's state of affairs and those of the last few decades reflect an eerie similarity. "When the oil crisis hit in the early 1970s, it was the last straw for overextended college and university budgets," Taylor reminds the reader. "Presidents turned down the thermostats, told everybody to put on an extra sweater and stopped hiring."

At the heart of his thesis is the notion that colleges and universities need to begin to see themselves more as wholes rather than as the sum of their individual parts. According to Taylor, many departments are more concerned with preserving their own self-interests than with the ultimate efficacy of the entire institution.

"There can be no meaningful reform of higher education without redesigning departments in ways that will support more extensive collaboration among faculty members and students working in different fields," Taylor argues. "Departments and programs should have the openness and flexibility that allow them to adapt to the constantly evolving structure of knowledge."

In order to rectify the situation, Taylor offers a number of carefully reasoned – though not necessarily innovative or terribly original – proposals for revitalizing our colleges and universities. Among

these is a recognition of the preeminent importance of undergraduate instruction. As other authors have recently explained, teaching has often been relegated to a kind of second-class status at many institutions. Taylor passionately asserts that this is an unfortunate and misguided trend that should be countered forcefully and without delay.

"Master teachers should be paid as much as leading researchers and writers," Taylor boldly proclaims. "This increase in compensation should be reallocated from the salaries of faculty members who neither produce noteworthy research nor teach effectively. The combination of increased incentives and national recognition should help to elevate the status of teaching in colleges and universities."

And not unlike a growing number of critics both within and outside academia, Taylor calls for the abolition of tenure, primarily because of its reported complicity in making it almost impossible to get rid of faculty members who have seemingly outlived their usefulness.

"In education as in finance, there is no such thing as a sure bet," Taylor notes. "It makes absolutely no sense for a college or university to make lifetime commitments to faculty members whose performance can neither be predicted nor modified." As for academic freedom; i.e., the right that tenure was designed to protect, Taylor offers this assessment after reflecting on his more than 40 years as an academic: "I cannot think of a single person who was more willing to express his or her views after tenure than before."

"A viable system for appointment, review, promotion and dismissal must fit the new organizational structure of colleges and universities and must be designed to adapt to their ongoing evolution," Taylor adds.

"Crisis on Campus" joins a growing list of books calling for real and substantive reform in higher education. Although many of his observations and recommendations are not new, Taylor does offer them with unique insights and credibility. We should all take notice.

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

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