



Alternative Solutions to Higher Education's Challenges: An Appreciative Approach to Reform

Harrison, Laura M.; and Mather, Peter C.
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016

Book Review

Tags: changes in higher education | content and context | student learning

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The crisis of the American higher education is no longer news. Rather than prosecuting the state of educational affairs with the dominant approach of “*crisis zeitgeist*” held among educationalists and analysts (65), Harrison and Mather examine the positive contributions of higher education and analyze problems through positive inquiry, alongside their critique as learners, professors, and administrators in the system. Throughout the eight chapters, the authors show how older and current research in theories, applications, and empirical data can strengthen the interdisciplinary and interconnected industry – both within and outside of itself (ch. 2). While mindful of the current commodification of education or the consumeristic mentality currently involved in reprogramming or (re)structuring education, the authors urge a more holistic evaluation of not just the value of higher education towards vocationalism but also its purpose for cultivating individuals, community life, and public service: to see that education as a means of vocationalism (career development, preparing learners for better paying jobs) is not more important than to embrace the intrinsic value of liberal arts education for nurturing knowledgeable citizens who will in time contribute to the democratic ideals of public society (chs. 3 and 5).

The thrust of Harrison and Mather’s proposal is a hopeful, though realistic, imagination of “what can we create together” (46) not just with educators, but also with community engagement (50). Thus they recommend a shift from a pedagogy of “standardization testing” to cultivating attentiveness to the different “narratives” for “meaningful student learning” (ch. 4), and from a focus of merely cognitive and pragmatic (applicable) knowledge to building a holism of cognitive, affective, and other facets of learning, and developing the whole person (chs. 6 and 7). Accordingly, universities and community colleges need to learn to leverage what

each offers best without denigrating one another (denigration happens when leaders wrongly conflate or differentiate vocational and remedial goals of education in both types of institutions). They need to create infrastructures that provide level-playing fields for learners of different economic and ethnic standings in matching institutions, curricula, and related discourses on the recipients and goals of education (59; 83-86).

The volume does not only register theoretical concerns; the authors report positive efforts from select institutions that have redirected discourses and implementation for overcoming crisis. The selection includes well-known and lesser-known institutions, such as Ball State University, Berea College, College of Wooster, Columbia University, Denison University, Duke University, Emory University, Kentucky State University, Ohio University, Santa Clara University, St. Mary's College, University of California Santa Cruz, University of North Carolina, Wake Forest University, and Western Governors' University in the United States, and it even provides occasional reviews of institutions outside of North America, such as the Asheshi University in Ghana.

Though discussions in the volume would resonate with colleagues in religious studies programs, the volume did not provide application for religious or theological studies programs. Various efforts by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) to overhaul religious offerings (curriculum, faculty, student enrollment, and so forth), such as granting reduced M.A. and M.Div. curriculum to requesting member institutions have both helped and added to the challenges of re-envisioning religious studies programs in light of the current educational crisis. The search for better resolutions in the sea of analyses continues with no clear landing in sight.

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