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Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa

University of Chicago Press, 2010, 272 pp., ISBN 978-0226028552.

Reviewed by Steve Conn, LeTourneau University, and Josh Wymore, Gordon College

According to *Academically Adrift*, students are not learning much in college. Sociologist authors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa derive this conclusion from research spanning two years and 2,300 students. Their data, rooted in the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), show that first-year students demonstrated limited improvement between their first and second years. Using extensive background research culminating in a multiplicity of demographic variables, the authors intend to eliminate all confounding factors and show that colleges are the cause of limited learning. Since its release in early 2011, *Adrift* has sparked debate and discussion among readers and has served as a challenge to academics and administrators alike.

The size and scope of the research is impressive. Touching 24 four-year institutions of every mission and type, the comprehensiveness of this learning assessment transcends past projects by a wide margin. In contrast to instruments like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the CLA attempts to measure critical thinking directly through complex case studies and essay questions that are meant to span every field and discipline. Since critical thinking is one of higher education's chief goals (an assumption stated by the authors), the CLA provides the foundation for examining collegiate learning and consequent institutional effectiveness in creating learning.

Their research found that students in general learn very little. While the top 10% of students saw a 43% improvement in their scores between their first and fourth semesters, 45% demonstrated no significant growth at all. An exploration of the subgroups finds that privileged, white students with educated families and strong scholastic preparation grew at an admirable rate while minority students with previous poor schooling were doomed to continue underperforming. Thus, while colleges posit to close the educational gap between the privileged and underprivileged, the authors criticize institutions as merely perpetuating the status quo.

The authors take a broad look at the current state of higher education to explain these poor results. Due to growing demands for scholarship and service, faculty priorities increasingly skew away from undergraduate teaching and focus more on research productivity and pursuing areas of personal interest. Their research is evaluated in a highly competitive environment, demanding more time and energy in non-teaching related responsibilities (such as grant-writing) and leaving little time to spend on honing teaching skills and improving classroom instruction (a mere 11 hours a week according to *Adrift*). Increasing demands on colleges and universities to provide expansive student services as well as transparency and accountability force administrators and faculty alike to spend more time on business and administration, accreditation, retention, recruitment, involvement, diversity, sustainability, and a laundry list of other issues. Although these efforts are indirectly tied to student learning in a variety of ways, they take time and attention away from improving direct instruction.

Students are also at fault for their lack of learning. Adopting an *Animal House*-like worldview, students increasingly view college as a social experience with minimum academic expectations. Ironically, this culture permeates a population of unprepared students. Because of increasing financial demands and calls for greater accessibility, colleges often have little choice but to enroll students who are uninterested in college level scholarship and unable to meet the demands required of them. Forty percent of faculty surveyed agreed that students lack the basic skills needed to do college work, yet the average student still spends only 12 hours a week preparing for class. Thus, studying has reached an all-time low and academic investment continues to peter out at a time when the wholehearted pursuit of learning could not be more necessary. As the global market becomes more competitive and higher education becomes more accessible, the social credentialing approach of many schools falls far short of meeting job force needs.

But are Arum and Roksa's death knells as ominous as they sound? Many researchers contest their broad-sweeping pronouncements based on insufficient data. First, the CLA, while recognized as a good tool, is not established as the preeminent measure of learning by any means. Like the SAT, the CLA provides a snapshot of a limited sector of learning. Despite this recognized fact, a fundamental assumption behind this study is that the CLA is a definitive measure of learning quality. As their own research shows, however, not all courses of study are equally equipped to increase scores on the CLA.

Students who saw the biggest gains on the CLA were those whose classes incorporated the most CLA-like task – reading, writing, and critical thinking. Because some majors spend more time in lab settings or on math homework than they dedicate to reading and writing, engineers and other technical majors fall behind traditional liberal arts majors in CLA scores. Obviously, a test's inability to measure such technical learning is not necessarily an accurate indicator of stunted growth. One could argue, though, that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to create scholars across disciplines who all possess these types of skills.

Second, the study pulled from a variety of schools whose average retention rate between first and second years is under 50%. The authors downplay this factor, stating that, at worst, this fact inflates the typical amount of learning measured as less-prepared students tend to withdraw before completing the post-test. But this institutional characteristic stands out as a blemish on the instructional power of the institutions studied. Regardless of the validity of their principles, such a sub-par research pool severely limits the applicability of their findings.

The student affairs professional may be concerned with the inferences drawn by the authors in regards to the co-curriculum. Arum and Roska seem to view activities outside of the classroom as a distraction from learning – a perspective affirmed by CLA data that shows a negative correlation between learning and extracurricular involvement. Again, their methodology falls short by conglomerating volunteering, working, and participating in clubs and fraternities/sororities into one extracurricular variable – an approach that doubtlessly eliminates the well-researched differences between various types of extracurriculars and their consequent learning gains (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). While the research presented in *Drift* certainly indicates that students could benefit from spending more time on classwork and studying in a more focused institutional setting, educators should not let this issue reduce their commitment to investing time and energy in the larger learning environment that is life outside the classroom.

Setting aside the limitations of Arum and Roska's research methodology, their literature review clearly shows one noteworthy finding: emphasis on classroom

learning has decreased in both the student and faculty ranks. The commodification of higher education is grounded in other writings of late as well, challenging classroom educators to address consumerist attitudes as well as learning gaps. It is at this juncture of life and learning that the student development professional is most critical. As a moor in the midst of a college student's drift through college, student affairs personnel carry the responsibility of sages and mentors. Their task and opportunity is, above all else, to provide perspective that comes from time and wisdom and Eternal connectedness. More important than the content of a given course is the hard fought shift from performance to perseverance, away from our own accomplishments toward a focus on God's approval.

Academically Adrift shines an uncomfortable light on the state of higher education. Its challenge to faculty and students is to return to the primary charge of a college education: teaching students how to think and learn. As student development professionals, it is our task to till the fecund co-curricular environment to cultivate these same skills outside the classroom. The undergraduate obsession with the social realm of college life further increases the need for skilled professionals to help students draw meaning from their college experiences, anchoring them to timeless truths and providing an eternal perspective through which to view their reality.

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