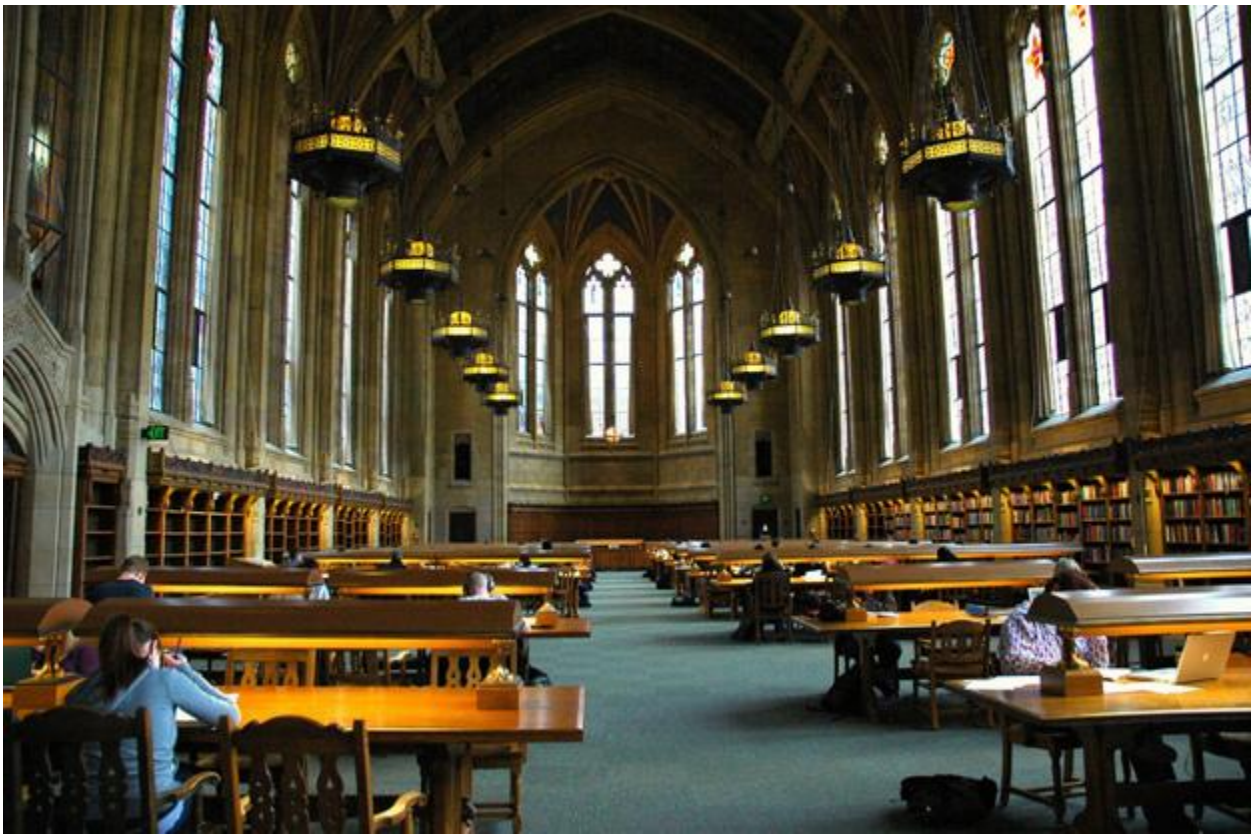
A Lack Of Rigor Leaves Students 'Adrift' In College

by NPR STAFF



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Students study in Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington in Seattle. The authors of *Academically Adrift* find that in the first two years of college, "with a large sample of more than 2,300 students, we observe no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills for at least 45 percent of the students in our study."

Academically Adrift

February 9, 2011

As enrollment rates in colleges have continued to increase, a new book questions whether the historic number of young people attending college will actually learn all that much once they get to campus. In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, two authors present a study that followed 2,300 students at 24 universities over the course of four years. The study measured both the amount that students improved in terms of critical thinking and writing skills, in addition to how much they studied and how many papers they wrote for their courses.

Richard Arum, a co-author of the book and a professor of sociology at New York University, tells NPR's Steve Inskeep that the fact that more than a third of students showed no improvement in critical thinking skills after four years at a university was cause for concern.

"Our country today is part of a global economic system, where we no longer have the luxury to put large numbers of kids through college and

By Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa
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Read An Excerpt

university and not demand of them that they are developing these higher order skills that are necessary not just for them, but for our society as a whole," Arum says.

Part of the reason for a decline in critical thinking skills could be a decrease in academic rigor; 35 percent of students reported studying five hours per week or less, and 50 percent said they didn't have a single course that required 20 pages of writing in their previous semester.

According to the study, one possible reason for a decline in academic rigor and, consequentially, in writing and reasoning skills, is that the principal evaluation of faculty performance comes from student evaluations at the end of the semester. Those evaluations, Arum says, tend to coincide with the expected grade that the student thinks he or she will receive from the instructor.

There's a huge incentive set up in the system [for] asking students very little, grading them easily, entertaining them, and your course evaluations will be high.

- Richard Arum

Zachary Menchini

Author Richard Arum, a professor of sociology at New York University, co-authored *Academically Adrift* along with Josipa Roksa, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

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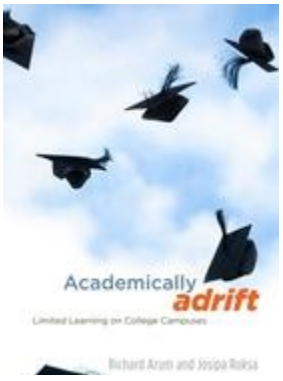
At every university, however, there are students who defy the trend of a decline in hours spent studying — and who do improve their writing and thinking skills. The study found this to occur more frequently at more selective colleges and universities, where students learn slightly more and have slightly higher academic standards. Overall, though, the study found that there has been a 50 percent decline in the number of hours a student spends studying and preparing for classes from several decades ago.

"If you go out and talk to college freshmen today, they tell you something very interesting," Arum says. "Many of them will say the following: 'I thought college and university was going to be harder than high school, and my gosh, it turned out it's easier.' "

Excerpt: 'Academically Adrift'

RICHARD ARUM and JOSIPA ROKSA



Chapter 2: Origins and Trajectories

Public and policy discussions of higher education over the course of the twentieth century have focused on one issue in particular: access. Massive expansion of higher education, led by the public sector, has created unprecedented opportunities for students to continue their education beyond high school. Although institutional barriers and inequalities in access persist and concerns about affordability continue to mount, American higher education today educates more than eighteen million students in more than 4,300 degree-

granting institutions. Educational expectations have been on the rise, with more than 90 percent of high school students *expecting* to attend college. And many are indeed crossing the threshold of higher education: more than 70 percent of recent high school graduates have enrolled in either a two-year or a four-year institution. As Martin Trow has observed, higher education has been transformed from a privilege into an assumed right—and, for a growing proportion of young adults, into an expected obligation.

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Although growing proportions of high school graduates are entering higher education, many are not prepared for college-level work and many others have no clear plan for the future. Most American high schools have come to embrace a "college for all" mentality, encouraging students to proceed to higher education regardless of their academic performance. Consequently, high school students expect to enroll in college and complete bachelor's degrees, even when they are poorly prepared to do so judging from their grade point averages, high school rank, or courses taken. In a survey of more than two thousand high school seniors in the Chicago metropolitan area, sociologist James Rosenbaum reported that almost half of the students in the sample (46 percent) agreed with the statement: "Even if I do not work hard in high school, I can still make my future plans come true."

Students' ambitions are misaligned not only with their academic performance in high school, but also with the educational requirements of their expected occupations. In a recent study of American teenagers, Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson reported that only 44 percent of students had aligned ambitions, meaning that they expected to attain as much education as was typically required of their intended occupation. Many students entering higher education today seem to understand that college education is important but have little specific information about or commitment to a particular vision of the future. One student in psychologist Jeffrey Arnett's study *Emerging Adulthood* summarized what many seemed to be experiencing upon entry into college: "I just wasn't ready. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do."

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It is this unique point in time—when access to college is widespread, concerns about inadequate academic preparation are prevalent, and drifting through college without a clear sense of purpose is readily apparent— that serves as the historic context for our observations of the lives of students as they unfold at twenty-four four-year institutions. While sociologists have often focused on the top or the bottom of the educational hierarchy, we are describing college life as it is experienced by students attending typical four-year institutions (for a detailed discussion of the sample, see the methodological appendix). We begin our analysis by considering what these students bring to higher education, particularly in terms of academic preparation; what types of courses and activities they engage in; and, most importantly, how much they develop their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing over their first two years in college. As policymakers champion increasing access and improving graduation rates, it is appropriate to ask: How much are students actually learning in contemporary higher education? The answer for many undergraduates, we have concluded, is not much.

Limited Learning

Teaching students to think critically and communicate effectively are espoused as the principal goals of higher education. From the Commission on the Future of Higher Education's recent report *A Test of Leadership* to the halls of Ivy League institutions, all corners of higher education endorse the importance of these skills. When promoting student exchange across the world, former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings urged foreign students to take advantage of "the creativity and diversity of American higher education, *its focus on critical thinking*, and its unparalleled access to world- class research." The American Association of University Professors agrees: ". . . critical thinking . . . is the hallmark of American education—an education designed to create thinking citizens for a free society." Indeed, 99 percent of college faculty say that developing students' ability to think critically is a "very important" or "essential" goal of undergraduate education. Eighty-seven percent also claim that promoting students' ability to write effectively is "very important" or "essential."

However, commitment to these skills appears more a matter of principle than practice, as the subsequent chapters in this book document. The end result is that many students are only minimally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their journeys through higher education. From their freshman entrance to the end of their sophomore year, students in our sample on average have improved these skills, as measured by the CLA, by only 0.18 standard deviation. This translates into a seven percentile point gain, meaning that an average-scoring student in the fall of 2005 would score seven percentile points higher in the spring of 2007. Stated differently, freshmen who enter higher education at the 50th percentile would reach a level equivalent to the 57th percentile of an incoming freshman class by the end of their sophomore year. Three semesters of college education thus have a barely noticeable impact on students' skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing.

How do we know that a 0.18 standard deviation does not represent remarkable growth? There are no universal standards for learning in higher education, leaving open the question of how much learning is enough, or desirable, or even can reasonably be expected. The past provides one benchmark against which to compare the present. There is at least some evidence that college students improved their critical thinking skills much more in the past than they do today. Summarizing an extensive body of research, Pascarella and Terenzini estimated that seniors had a 0.50 standard deviation advantage over freshmen in the 1990s. In contrast, during the 1980s students developed their skills at twice the rate: seniors had an advantage over freshmen of one standard deviation. While useful for demonstrating a decline in learning over time, standard deviations do not present an intuitive interpretation of student gains. Another way to assess the magnitude of learning during the first two years in college is to estimate how many students experience gains that fall below the level of statistical significance, or in other words are statistically not above zero. With a large sample of more than 2,300 students, we observe no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills for at least 45 percent of the students in our study. An astounding proportion of students are progressing through higher education today without measurable gains in general skills as assessed by the CLA. While they may be acquiring subject-

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specific knowledge or greater self- awareness on their journeys through college, many students are not improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing.

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