



Source: *Thought & Action* Fall 2011

Thinking Critically about Undergraduate Education

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses

By Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011

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In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa ask provocative and important questions: What if calls to expand access to higher education are based on the faulty assumption that students actually learn something while enrolled? What if students show few gains in critical thinking while in college and those gains disproportionately benefit the already well-prepared and otherwise privileged? Throughout their work, Arum and Roksa make such arguments, adding that, “evidence of limited learning and persistent inequality should give pause to the recent emphasis on ‘college for all’ policies” (54). Indeed, they claim that a full 45 percent of students show no gains in critical thinking during their first two years of college and that most spend little time on academic work. Fewer than half of the sophomores in their study reported that during the previous semester they had taken both a course requiring 40 or more pages of reading per week and one requiring 20 or more pages of writing.

Arum and Roksa make these claims based on their examination of survey data, transcripts, and test scores of more than 2,300 students at a diverse collection of 24 four-year colleges—data gathered at students’ entry into college and again at the end of their sophomore years. The measure of critical thinking used is the “performance task” element of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which requires students to weigh evidence, analyze and synthesize data, and respond in writing to a prompt that simulates a real-world situation. Though among the more useful instruments of its type, the CLA is not without critics who question the relevance of the tasks to various test takers and students’ desires to perform well on them. Moreover, as the authors appropriately note, “the CLA measures a specific set of skills—namely critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing—that is far from the totality of learning or the full repertoire of skills acquired in higher education” (108). Indeed, it does so after two years, rather than after the completion of a bachelor’s degree.[1] As such, *Academically Adrift* is simultaneously among the more useful studies of student learning undertaken in recent years and one that can address only part of a larger set of questions about the learning that takes place in America’s four-year colleges and universities.

Critics of higher education and its constituents will find much to like in *Academically Adrift*. Arum and Roksa paint a bleak picture of student culture and of students who enter college somewhat aimlessly, spend diminished hours on their studies, and reap diminished returns for their “efforts.” The authors are, at times, even more critical of faculty and their emphasis on research, service, and professional advancement over undergraduate instruction. These actors are influenced by larger organizational and policy structures that perpetuate what the authors believe to be a misguided educational system that emphasizes credentials and treats students as consumers, rather than learners. Indeed, Arum and Roksa critique both the reluctance of administrators to police student behavior and the emphasis on enrollment and finances, rather than on student learning. Institutions of higher education have, according to the authors, lost their moral purposes and their footing.

The ensuing chapters then detail the key findings related to changes in CLA scores, implicating students’ entering characteristics and campus experiences. Students with stronger academic preparation and students who attended more selective institutions showed greater gains in critical thinking; initial disparities between white students and African American students were exacerbated. Those who participated in fraternities and sororities showed fewer gains relative to their peers, as did those who were majoring in business, education, or social work. Moreover, Arum and Roksa argue that understandings of student employment need to be nuanced, as working on-campus is beneficial only up to 10 hours per week. They also question the trend toward collaborative learning, noting that more time studying alone is positively associated with gains in critical thinking, while time studying with peers is negatively associated with such gains. Perhaps most strikingly, the authors concede that social integration might be related to retention but argue that its effects on learning are far less clear, and may be negative.

Arum and Roksa harshly critique students, at times in ways that seem unnecessary, including an unsupported quip about their “disheveled physical appearance in early morning classes” (98). Still, they lay much of the problem at the feet of the instructors, suggesting that they are not prepared for the role, not trained to foster collaborative learning, and discouraged from focusing on student learning. They speculate that shifting staffing patterns might be affecting relations between students and their instructors. There is a flip side to their critique that advocates for faculty might find refreshing: faculty matter to student learning. Faculty with high expectations of their students and faculty who demand that their students read and write at higher levels can contribute to gains in learning outcomes (even if meeting with faculty outside of class showed no relation to student gains). If the authors are correct in their assertions, then creating conditions for faculty and graduate instructors to succeed must matter, as well.

Academically Adrift is an important book that should be read by those interested in student learning, public policy, and faculty work. It benefits from its longitudinal nature, its useful methodological appendix, and the authors’ care for students’ critical thinking. As with all important books, though, it should be read closely to assess what the authors actually claim—rather than what the media has picked up on—and to see what the evidence actually supports. So, for example, the argument that American colleges and universities should reprioritize to focus more attention on undergraduate education is probably widely shared, but it is not one that can be demonstrated in the absence of any evidence regarding the costs, benefits, and value of other aspects of higher education’s comprehensive missions or without a fuller analysis of the full outcomes of college attendance for students. It is also hard, based on data gathered from students at the end of their sophomore years, to justify claims such as that students “might graduate, but they are failing to develop higher-order cognitive skills that it is widely assumed college students should master” (121) or that “no actors in the system are primarily interested in undergraduate student growth” (125). And, although the authors nod toward the history of American higher education, a more nuanced consideration of historical trends could have provided greater context, pointed to longstanding issues of marginalized faculty employment, highlighted the tradition of consumerism in American higher education, and raised questions about their calls for a return to a morally purposeful university. Perhaps the authors are correct that we are not now in a golden age of promoting students’ critical thinking, but that does not mean that there has ever been one, nor that colleges and universities are not otherwise quite beneficial.

ENDNOTE

[1] Additional data collection after four years shows that 36 percent of students show no significant gains in their score. Those data, which are not included in the book, can be found in: Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Esther Cho, *Improving Undergraduate Learning: Findings and Policy Recommendations* from the SSRC-CLA Longitudinal Project. Available at http://highered.ssrc.org/?page_id=28