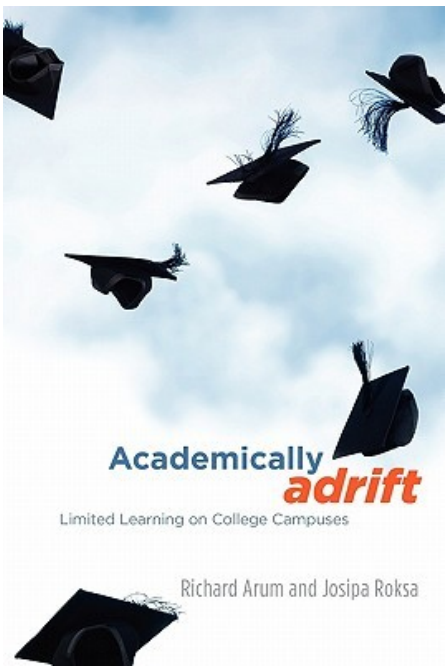

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses

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In spite of soaring tuition costs, more and more students go to college every year. A bachelor's degree is now required for entry into a growing number of professions. And some parents begin planning for the expense of sending their kids to college when they're born. Almost everyone strives to go, but almost no one asks the fundamental question posed by *Academically Adrift*: are undergraduates really learning anything once they get there?

For a large proportion of students, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's answer to that question is a definitive no. Their extensive research draws on survey responses, transcript data, and, for the first time, the state-of-the-art Collegiate Learning Assessment, a standardized test administered to students in their first semester and then again at the end of their second year. According to their analysis of more than 2,300 undergraduates at twenty-four institutions, 45 percent of these students demonstrate no significant improvement in a range of skills—including critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing—during their first two years of college. As troubling as their findings are, Arum and Roksa argue that for many faculty and administrators they will come as no surprise—instead, they are the expected result of a student body distracted by socializing or working and an institutional culture that puts undergraduate learning close to the bottom of the priority list.

Academically Adrift holds sobering lessons for students, faculty, administrators, policy makers, and parents—all of whom are implicated in promoting or at least ignoring contemporary campus culture. Higher education faces crises on a number of fronts, but Arum and Roksa's report that colleges are failing at their most basic mission will demand the attention of us all.

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses Details

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From Reader Review Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses for online ebook

Jason says

After receiving a pretty lucrative grant from some folks I just can't name here, at my former gig at Pacific Tech, I recruited a large group of our best and brightest to help me work on some really exciting, cutting-edge science. We were building a laser--something that could revolutionize the industry. But these kids--bright as they may have been--needed motivation. They were a slack bunch, always goofing off. I needed to ride them hard, and I did. Without my sense of discipline, all bets would have been off--they'd have faded into the muddling mediocrity that is American higher ed.

The worst offender was Chris Knight. Worst because Knight was probably the most intelligent and the least ambitious, and his sarcasm and tomfoolery tainted everyone. I was working very hard to get young Mitch (whose last name I'll keep mum, to protect him) on track, but Knight... Knight really steams me, you know? With his pool parties and his ironic t-shirts. The project did get back on track for a while, 'til Knight famously blew up my plans with that popcorn stunt. That shit-eating little weasel confirms everything this book argues.

Tara Brabazon says

Five stars do not seem enough reward for this book. Every university academic and every student should read it. The writers demonstrate how and why 'limited learning' takes places in our courses and classrooms. Their arguments are both horrifying and inspiring. If we think differently and behave differently, then we can make a difference. This book has changed how I think about the world.

Marks54 says

This is a book in the broader literature presenting research on the state of undergraduate education. This volume attracted much attention and raises good issues. It is based on a statistical analysis of the Collegiate Learning Assessment survey results. Two of the most notable conclusions from the study are that students are not spending much time studying and that they are not learning that much, presumably from the lack of time and focus and also due to distractions from extra curricular activities, work, etc.

The results are plausible and not dissimilar from the results we have identified in efforts to assess undergraduate education. I think the book grossly oversells the results and that the picture is not as dire as it seems.

First, I am doubtful regarding the extent to which a broad assessment instrument can provide useful information - beyond a broad picture - of undergraduate learning of items such as "critical thinking", which will mean a dozen different things in you ask faculty in a dozen different disciplines. Besides, even under the best of conditions, the potential value of self-report surveys is limited. The "family feud" approach to educational research (survey says!) when done at such a broad level is more a symptom of the state of educational research than anything else. Where research and its conclusions are concerned, I am a believer in

GIGO.

Second, the link between hours spent studying and learning results is certainly valid at some levels, but the relationship need not be a linear one of hour spent to what is learned. Some students may be more efficient at studying than other, especially in a world of proliferating AP classes in high school. Why penalize them by imposing some hourly metric? No matter how many hours are spent, some students may have problems in understanding differential equations, modern poetry, and the techniques of modern dance. I don't believe an "hours spent" logic is without value but it can oversimplify. At $50K+ per year at elite private schools, I hope there is more to this than can be simply assessed on such straightforward surveys.

Third, the other activities besides classroom materials are important and worth the time, as is the experience of learning to navigate the college experience on one's own.

As I said, I do not disagree with the results as much as wish that the sales pitch was moderated. Another aspect of what is going on here is that faculty may not be thinking as much about undergraduate education as they had in prior years and there is likely something to that, especially in larger public institutions. The pressures of research and publishing, coupled with the established norms for the prestige in teaching graduate students may well have contributed to a lack of attention to undergraduates. That should be sharply modified, but it will take faculty and administrator attention more than survey results. These results are informative and useful but can at best be a part of a reform effort.

Stuart says

This is really a research article disguised as a book. That's the worst part of this study. Also the graphics are miserable and the quality of the writing is wooden. So much for the bad.

The good is that this work is perhaps the final brick in the wall in assessing the nature of contemporary college education. Chris Healy and I put one brick in that wall: college grades are ridiculously high in comparison to past grading standards. Babcock and Marks put in another brick: college students are studying about half as much as they did in the 1960s. The NSSE studies indicate that students, on average, care little about the academic aspects of college. Other studies have shown that today's college graduates are less literate than the college graduates of the past.

Until now, the defense on the part of the education establishment in response to the above analyses is that none of this matters. What's important is that college education still gives students life skills and still does an admirable job in teaching students critical thinking, analytic reasoning and problem solving.

There were no data to back this rebuttal on the part of the education establishment. It was just a sunny assertion. Now, with this book, maybe we have some data. If the methodology used here is correct, we don't do a good job teaching students critical thinking and problem solving skills. Students are studying 12 hours a week on average. Their average GPA is 3.2. After four years of study, over one third have not improved upon the academic skills they possessed when they entered college.

There are plenty of books that talk on and on about the nature of college without any real data. I find almost all of them to be exercises in narcissism. This isn't that kind of book. It's all about the numbers. The numbers,

if they are correct, say we've increasingly turned college into a very expensive nine month summer camp for many students.

However, there are, the more I think about it, some problems with the methodology used in this book. The CLA test that is the foundation for most (but not all) of the analyses and conclusions of the authors is highly correlated with SAT/ACT scores and like SAT/ACT scores is poorly correlated with grades. The test also has a ceiling, which means that probably about five percent of the student body cannot do much better over time (the creators of the test say it's one to three percent). There is certainly some part of the CLA test that measures something of value in terms of learning. But like the SAT/ACT it's likely measuring something akin to "aptitude" for learning rather than learning itself.

Like that SAT/ACT, there is certainly noise in the CLA measure. Taking a difference between two CLA tests, which is what the authors do here, results in even more noise. The authors may well be confusing signal with noise in their assessements.

This book, in the end, is consistent with other measures that show unequivocally that we aren't doing a good job at teaching at the college level. But its results are not, probably, as strong a confirmation as I might surmise based on a cursory reading.

Mark says

Arum and Roksa make good points in their book, Academically Adrift. For many decades, America has been riding on its academic (and other)laurels, and it is books like this that remind us a citizens that it is time for change. Arum and Roksa use statistical studies to present numbers that are unfortunately too close to reality. Among other points that they make is that college may not be for everyone, and that both teachers and students are not fulfilling their contractual duties to each other. One may ask: how can students make 'B's' and 'A's', get a degree, and come out of college with no more critical thinking skills than they began with. Other points concern the attitudes of both colleges and students, an attitude called the 'consumer student'. The consumer student, according to Arum and Roksa,is one that is not at college to learn, but simply to get a degree. Furthermore, such a student expects a grade point average in each class based upon the fact that they have paid for that class: academic integrity becomes secondary. This attitude, Arum and Roksa claim, is being accepted by many academic establishments across the board (both those that are highly respected and those that are less so).

While their studies seem to correlate with many aspects of academic reality, they are studies that are primarily based on sociological and psychological foundations: both academic by nature. For that reason, I would suggest that one takes their claims with a grain of salt as it were. I give the book a 4-star rating mainly based upon the subject-matter, one which I would suggest needs much study, reflection, and most of all action on the part of good teachers and academic administrators.

Ryan Patrick says

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Elizabeth Kissling says

I looked at some of the other GoodReads reviews after I finished this book, and I have to agree with those who said the writing style is wooden and not engaging. But I was interested enough in the topic and the findings to read the whole thing fairly quickly -- and during finals week. It was fascinating to read this while grading final projects in my visual communication class; the authors' findings about college students match much of what my students have to say about themselves.

I had assigned a *visual self portrait*, with a brief explanatory essay applying concepts from class. Most students elected to created photo collages. They identify the most important things in their lives to be their friends, their families, and their faith. Next were movies and video games they enjoy, and pets. When they wrote about or included images related to their university experience, it was about college friendships and parties, sorority life, or sports. None mentioned their major, and very few mentioned career goals or plans for the future, except for the desire to have a family.

Candy Wood says

Now I see why so many news stories following the publication of this book picked up on the minimum requirement for college students of at least forty pages of reading a week and twenty pages of writing a semester: the authors repeat that formula many times, and stress how students who have met these requirements perform better in “tasks—such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment—that require skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing.” While their data support this assertion, why do we need statistical research to prove that students who study more also learn more? Their quantitative surveys don’t distinguish kinds of reading and writing, or even how they (or student respondents) count pages. The authors like their “adrift” metaphor, applying it variously to institutions, faculty, and students, and they examine many possible causes including family background and K-12 preparation, but it doesn’t really help in the search for solutions, nor does their assumption that faculty are more concerned with pursuing their own research than with undergraduate learning (not true on my small-college campus). For anyone involved at all in higher education, it’s a book to challenge critical thinking.

David says

This is a book that should be read by every college professor, dean, provost, and president. Far too many of our colleges are failing in their mission to educate undergraduates. The authors suggest one crude recommendation which they reiterate ad nauseum: have students read at least 40 pages a week per class and have them write over twenty pages in at least one class. This makes sense. Apparently, students are able to graduate from college without doing much studying, reading or writing. One of the culprits is grade inflation.

Another is the idiotic belief by administrators that students are customers and that education is a commodity to be sold like Big Macs or milk shakes. In actuality, students are more like patients or clients who come to a highly trained professional who can treat their illness: ignorance. They can't have it their way; they can't say "hold the literature, hold the math, hold the history." Students need to take general education classes to be reasonably well educated people. The goal is not just earning a credential--a diploma. The diploma is only paper; it is a a symbol of earning knowledge and skills.
The good news is that the math, science, and humanities majors do the best in critical thinking. Business majors are at the bottom with education and communication majors not far behind.
We, as a nation, can fix this problem if only we have the will.

Paul says

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses is a detailed collection of statistics and cross references to additional research compiled by the authors. While the book contains 259 pages, the relevant information it presents is limited to the first 144 pages. The remainder is devoted to the bibliography and validation of the authors' statistical analysis.

The book can be summarized by three basic themes:
Education is not equally available or of the same quality across socioeconomic lines.
Students don't want to study and want the easiest path to a degree.
Educators promote this behavior because they don't hold students to standards.

The book offers that students today have high aspirations but simply no plans for reaching those goals. They are "adrift" not only academically but in their lives. They have no drive and expect a degree to be handed to them. Some of the statistics presented as backup were a bit startling. The average college student sends only 27 hours per week on all academic activities; going to class, studying and working on assignments. This is less time spent on academics than the typical high school student. However, this lack of effort isn't reflected in their assessments as there has been little change in the average GPA of college students or graduation rates over the decades. Universities are simply handing out degrees to students that haven't earned them.

Both students and faculty are to blame. A number of student interviews are quoted in the book and show that students want to put in as little effort in their studies as possible and spend more time socializing and having fun. There is little incentive on the students' part to work hard because educators don't push them to perform. Some "ivy league" schools are noted as inflating grades so that the average GPA of their student population stays higher than average. This does a disservice to their students and could lead to a depreciation of the very brand image they are attempting to bolster.

The majority of the book details the dire situation in which we find the educational system today. The last chapter does offer a few solutions. These include: better preparing students for academics prior to reaching college, pulling back on the notion that every student needs to go to college because some simply won't be able to keep pace, holding higher education faculty to higher standards and improving curriculums to include more reading and writing which was shown to increase critical thinking skills.

Mary says

I'm not quite sure where I weigh in on this polemic against the university system. As an economics-minded individual, much evidence I find compelling, but some of it is inconsistent. As a rhetorician, some of the arguments are well-fashioned, qualified and hesitant, but some of them are door-bashing fear-mongering. As an overachieving hardliner, I definitely rally that students should be working harder, studying longer and not mucking about trapped in ineffective administrative policies that include vast recreational facilities, easy A's, and professors who aren't really teachers. As someone who learned the most in college through an after-school comedy group, I think maybe not all distractions from studying are disastrous. After all, the biggest companies to come out of college, from Microsoft to Apple to Facebook, are often the fruits of "individual pursuits" rather than nose-to-the-grindstone studying. I recognize that not every student who majors in "art appreciation" or takes a year off to discover himself is going to be a major mover and shaker, but there's got to be some space for those critical thinking skills to be applied in ways even teachers designing homework can't imagine.

Thore Husfeldt says

This is a splendid, dry, detailed, and frustrating little book, potentially interesting to most people involved in higher education: teachers, administrators, deans, student politicians, etc.

I've seen quite a few test of learning outcomes administered to large populations of students, but what makes this one interesting is the focus on the broad, general skill sets of liberal education: critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing. These are evaluated by a new test called the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). I'm a sucker for this kind of thing: standardised, well-defined, well-constructed, with clear scoring metrics. (In short, the student is provided with a clear task, a set of diverse written sources, and gets 90 minutes to write a recommendation.) Thousands of studens in dozens of colleges are subjected to this in a longitudinal study, and their performance is tracked through their college experience.

(For data nerds like me, this is broken down in social science fashion, with socioeconomic variables, GPAs, number of hours spent in fraternities, and whatnot. Standard deviations, multivariate regression models, tables, graphs, pie charts, and whatnot. Bliss.)

Unsurprisingly, the findings are harrowing. Most students learn very little or nothing, and leave college with dismal general skills. This, if anything, is the main message of this book.

More optimistically, the main message may actually be: it's complicated. Some students to very well. Most don't. And we understand very little about which environmental effects (say, teaching styles, learning styles, collegiate experience, professorial attitudes, curricular decisions) have any significant effect. There are some unsurprising correlations that we can confirm with the book's findings: studying is good, math is good, talking to your professor after class is good, taking classes that require substantial weekly reading and writing assignments is good, nonacademic social interaction is detrimental, high expectations (from professors towards students and from students towards peers) are good, etc. It is useful that the current study confirms these traditional recommendations. But of course, we don't know much about causation—good students may simply self-select into these learning patterns, curricular choices, and environments.

There are some surprises, though. For example, learning outcomes correlate with number of hours spent studying, but the correlation can be negative or positive, depending on whether you study alone or with peers. Which is which? I'm not going to spoil it.

So it is difficult to operationalise these results, even though they make for fascinating reading. Maybe instead of using this study to take concrete recommendations on how to improve higher education, it can at least stop us from making stupid mistakes. Next time a mid-level administrator suggest to you that “method X improves Y” (say, for X = Problem-based Learning and Y = student learning), hit him or her over the head with this study. Pretty much nothing improves anything. Doom and gloom.

Oh, and the Kindle edition is pretty bad, because the tables are rendered in very low resolution and don’t scale.

Michael says

Academically Adrift highlights an important problem with higher education: extremely low levels of learning, as measured in terms of critical thinking, complex problem solving, and communication. The authors are careful to point out that this does not mean that all forms of learning are in decline—specifically, the tests used did not in any way measure subject-/domain-specific knowledge. However, the authors rightly assert that the particular forms of learning they concern themselves with (critical thinking, complex problem solving and communication skills) are considered essential by employers and faculty alike, are widely viewed as being in decline, and that it is the responsibility of higher education to foster quantifiable growth in those areas.

Based on observational studies, the book is very limited in terms of offering practical advice for reform; however, the authors do seem to do a good job of articulating the complexity of the problem and its many levels, particularly as it relates to the culture on American campuses at colleges and universities.

Though the advice they offer is scant, and, often, generic, the authors do point out several activities and characteristics that appear to have either a positive or a negative relationship with learning, including:

• working on or off campus
• living on or off campus
• studying individually or alone
• involvement in fraternities or sororities
• involvement in clubs or student organizations
• interaction with faculty
• course requirements
• race
• academic preparation (number of AP courses taken in high school, and/or SAT/ACT scores)
• parents' education levels

Some of the relationships observed do seem to point to areas where specific changes could lead to improved learning (e.g., increased interaction with faculty); however, I find many needing further examination to clarify the observed relationship. Obviously, their research being observational, one cannot infer causal influences, however, they offer many theories which I find suspect (e.g., the effects of group study). Appropriately, the authors do stress the need for future research to develop a better understanding of what they have observed.

While reading chapter 5, A Mandate for Reform, a few things came to mind. One, yes, the basic mandates

the authors espouse are good, but they are more philosophical than practical—focusing on undergraduate student learning, finding and keeping good faculty, exhibiting higher expectations on students, etc. And where their suggestions are most concrete (e.g., requiring more intensive coursework, defined as reading 40 or more pages per week, and writing 20 pages or more per semester) I see problems regarding implementation as well as effectiveness.

For one, there is the problem of time. Using my own personal experience as a reference (which, may or may not be considered average, of course), I know that I struggle a great deal with finding time for studying—or with maintaining attention and focus as I study. Although I am a good student—I achieve relatively high marks, I am regularly on the Dean's list, and generally receive praise from my professors—nevertheless, I still struggle quite a bit with the idea of trying to simply study more or produce more work. That's not to say that I don't think I'm capable of doing more work than I do now—rather, I tend to feel like I don't perform up to my full capacity—I just don't think that simply adding "more" is the solution. I think it is a case of needing to work smarter, not necessarily longer.

I agree with their concerns regarding the consumer-based mindset of higher-education institutions in culture: "What conservative policy makers have missed, however, is that market-based educational reforms that elevate the role of students as 'consumers' do not necessarily yield improved outcomes in terms of student learning" (pg. 137). They present the issue fairly, though, outlining the positive effects such a mentality has had; however, they are quick to remind us of its possible consequences, as well.

Final Thoughts

Academically Adrift was a good book to read, even if as another reviewer pointed out, it is really a research paper disguised as a book. It is limited, in that it is strictly observational in nature; although it could identify the problem and highlight areas of concern, it could do little for making practical suggestions for reform—though the authors do provide some advice based on their findings.

They do a good job of establishing the problem. I agree with their finding that learning (as defined for their study) is in strong decline, and I agree that something (or, rather, a great many things) needs done to try to correct the problem. Their critique of the culture of higher education was enlightening, too. Although I have reservations about some of their findings, I agree with their mandate for further research and with their overarching goals. However, while I believe the general cultural reforms the authors indicated are important pieces of the puzzle, I think some of the items the book did not emphasize are, perhaps, more important to explore.

For one, I think academic preparation before entering college has become ineffective and needs substantial reform. In addition, I think society has changed so much that new methods of teaching, learning, and organization need to be developed in order to better reach the needs of today's students.

Megan says

I jumped into this book thinking it was going to be the most important book on education that I'd read this year. I was sorely disappointed. Arum bemoans the decline of "critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication" so much it becomes the mantra of the book. And yet, the book itself is as poorly written as any other dense, self-important piece of academese that I've ever had the irritation to read. Here's a sample sentence: "Full-time faculty in resource-poor institutions likely feel increasingly overwhelmed and

demoralized by the growing institutional demands placed on them and their inability to identify sufficient resources to maintain traditional levels of support for undergraduate education." If this were submitted by one of my students, I would write in the margin "SIMPLIFY!!" This sentence could make its point so much better is fewer words: "Faculty feel so much pressure on the job, they can't focus on their students' education."

My other complaint is that, in addition to all the jargon, I also had to wade through piles and piles of data, which the author felt very little incentive to actually interpret for the reader. Isn't the job of an author to synthesize and package hard research into palatable chunks for their readers' consumption? Many a time I felt my eyes just glazing over as I tried to make sense of a paragraph of statistics and percentages. It does little justice to the data if it is left raw and inaccessible to the reader.

Despite my complaints, the book is important. As Arum and Roksa write in a surprisingly engaging last chapter, "A Mandate for Reform," "The dissatisfaction of corporate leaders in the private sector with the quality of U.S. undergraduate education has... become palpable," and graduates are simply NOT showing up to the work force with the basic skills that employers and the economy as a whole desperately requires. We've got a long road ahead of us.

Mark Oppenlander says

Do students actually learn anything in college? That is the research question at the heart of *Academically Adrift*, which is presented as a book but is essentially a lengthy academic paper. Drs. Richard Arum and Josipa Roska test the hypothesis that, whether they learn anything vocationally significant in college, students who attend liberal arts schools come out with improved skills in the areas of critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication. Their findings suggest that this may not be true after all.

Using a instrument called the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the authors measure student ability in the three areas noted above at the beginning of the freshman year in college and again at the end of the sophomore year. The data shows little improvement across these skills. Arum and Roska then break the findings down further, attempting to see what factors might correlate to improved outcomes, including student contact with faculty outside of the classroom, academic preparation before college and amount of work or extracurricular activities in which students are involved. They use this data to suggest ways in which faculty or college administrators might improve the learning environment on campuses.

One of the more depressing findings in the research is that there is still a significant gap in learning outcomes along racial lines. In addition socio-economic status seems to play some role as does the amount of education a student's parents had. But perhaps most disturbing is Arum and Roksa's assertion that one of the fundamental reasons learning outcomes are so bad in colleges is because the system is not designed to actually stimulate learning. Instead, faculty are driven away from teaching toward research and tenure promotion activities while administrators are encouraged to treat students like consumers who are in search of a social experience in college, not an education. Unless these systemic issues are addressed, and incentives re-aligned, poor learning outcomes are likely to continue. The authors qualify their results and point out the limitations of the CLA and their findings, but anyone who has worked in higher education can likely validate some of the underlying truths in this study from their own experience. The research simply proves how widespread and pervasive the issues really are.

Unfortunately, this book is written in the style of an academic journal article, meaning it is dry and at times,

a bit obscure. The findings are truly important, but the writing is wooden and will be unlikely to reach a wide audience outside of academia. Parents and students will not be drawn to read this because, ironically, the authors do not present it using written communication appropriate to a broad audience. (Perhaps they should take the CLA and see how they fare?) The content of this book is probably worthy of four stars. But the presentation is two stars at best. I would love to see a "popular science" version of this research released so I could recommend it to a wider group of people. As it is, this one will primarily appeal to those of us who already work in higher education.
