

Book review:
Academically adrift: limited learning on college campuses
Arum, R. & Roksa, J. (2011) University of Chicago Press

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Rarely, if ever, has a book on the academy produced as much discussion and debate as *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Far beyond the realm of the usual higher education publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Inside Higher Ed*, this book by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa has been debated in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and even *Vanity Fair*. The authors have become minor celebrities as the scathing assessment results about the lack of learning in US higher education have emerged. With the costs of an education ever increasing, more and more students leaving education with a massive burden of debt, the US falling further behind other OECD countries in percentage of tertiary graduates, and the accountability and assessment movement transforming higher education, questions about just how much students are learning are being asked. This book asks these questions and paints a fairly dismal picture of what is happening.

This is one of those few academic books that could successfully crossover into the mainstream. However, with a hardcover list price of around \$US 65, a number of casual readers may be scared off. Given the press, reviews, and analyses that are readily available, a number of consumers may feel that they know enough about the book without having read it. The price will only add to their indecisiveness. Upon purchasing the book one of the first things I noticed was that much of it consisted of the methodological appendix, notes, bibliography, or index. In fact, only 144 of the book's 259 pages (56%) were standard prose. While there is certainly academic value in the back pages, I did feel a little cheated. I imagine that those outside of academia may feel this way even more so. Fortunately, much of the tabular data in the appendix is quite accessible. It is not replete with complex statistical terminology that may turn off or frustrate some readers, and though extremely dense, it is understandable. Another of the challenges that the book faces is that because so much has been written about it already, will it be able to keep readers interested and provide additional insights that has not been already been heard. To a limited degree it did this, but after about two chapters I began to feel as though the book was becoming rather repetitive. What perhaps would have been more effectively presented in a more condensed format had been stretched into a book. I found myself starting to skim through some of the text because of its repetitive nature and looking forward to the chapter's conclusion which generally, in a succinct and effectual manner, analyzed and summarized what had come before.

The book has been divided in to five chapters. The initial chapter effectively sets the stage by offering some useful context for the study of higher education through looking at issues like the faculty's expanding focus on research and the growing costs of higher education. It then lays out the methodology of the study from which the book is based and provides both an explanation and critique of the College Learning Assessment (CLA) which is the instrument used to measure to measure learning-specifically critical thinking, problem-solving, and writing. What is unique about the CLA is that it consists of three written tasks rather than the usual multiple choice format so dominant in the realm of large scale standardized exams. The authors put forth a strong argument as to why they have this critical thinking focus rather than on particular content. They argue that the issue of critical thinking is the one

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construct that nearly all faculty agree is key to a higher education. To conclude, the chapter ends with an excellent preview of the upcoming chapters.

The second chapter is where the disconcerting CLA results are first shared. The authors found that little learning occurs and that 45% of students did not demonstrate any significant improvement in critical thinking, problem-solving and writing over their first two years of college. Disturbingly, they also found that growth in learning was unequal and that the disadvantaged not only enter with lower scores, they failed to close the gap with their more advantaged peers. They then discussed the impact of the “college for all” policies that prevail and spoke of the lack of college readiness for many students. On a more positive note, they did explain that top students did show large gains in learning, which sets up the next two chapters looking at what students do and should be doing in college in order to learn more.

Chapters three and four is where I found the presentation to be slightly repetitive. Though much of the data was informative, I did feel as though I had the main ideas and did not require all of the details presented. The highlights of the third chapter were the information on the lack of studying done by students and the lack of rigour offered in many courses. A full 37% of students reported that they spend less than 5 hours per week on their studies outside of scheduled class time. Half of all students reported that they did not take a single course that required them to write more than twenty pages, and one third did not take a course requiring them to read at least forty pages per week. The point to all this is to ask how students can be expected to demonstrate increases in their ability to write and think critically if little is being asked of them and they are putting in limited effort. The fourth chapter was one of hope in that it examined what institutions can do to facilitate student learning. In it they present a conceptual framework which accurately portrayed variables impacting student learning. The good news was that they did find that “when faculty have high expectations and expect students to read and write reasonable amounts, students learn more” (p. 119). They also accurately critiqued the existing state of higher education in that it does seem as though *educating the next generation* has become the forgotten core mission.

The final chapter, *A Mandate for Reform*, does what the title purports in that it lays out the need for reform and offers tangible recommendations on how to proceed. The authors point to the importance of institutional leadership prioritizing student learning, the need to enhance both curriculum and instruction, the key distinction between persistence and learning, and finally the essentiality that accountability is an internally driven process rather than externally imposed. The chapter concludes with a message of hope through Kennedy’s quote about reaching for the moon.

Given my current immersion in the field of assessment of student learning and accreditation, this was a book that I ordered as soon as I had read the first articles about it in the academic press. The “devastating” critique put forth about learning in American higher education gave me pause to consider our own institutional priorities and commitment to quality undergraduate learning here in the UAE. Though many of the findings were quite sobering and even though my institution is facing many of the same external pressures such as larger class sizes and under-prepared students chronicled in the book, I still felt a sense of hope rather than despair. My most important take away was that academic rigour matters in a big way. Institutions and faculty who expect more from students can get more from students. Rigour in terms of intensive reading and writing does make a significant difference in levels of learning. It also made me reflect back on what I have always believed are the two key elements of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education 5. *Emphasize time on task* and 6. *Communicate high expectations* (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). If an institution is truly committed to quality undergraduate learning, it will support faculty in their quest to make this a reality.

Overall, for those in academia, for concerned parents, or for policy makers, this book is a must read. Though the methodology will be scrutinized, the findings of the study need to be taken seriously. Ultimately, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, brings to the surface key issues surrounding just how much students are learning. To anyone connected to higher education, these issues need to be examined in a critical manner to ensure that the higher education experience of their students is a positive one that leads to significant gains in learning.

Keywords

higher education, student learning, Collegiate Learning Assessment

References

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