

## Academically Adrift – Limited Learning on College Campuses

Richard Arum

Extraordinarily worthwhile goal; extraordinarily difficult undertaking

This book is an attempt to measure adequate yearly progress (AYP) in higher education. Stated another way, are university students getting an adequate return on the money and time invested in their education?

Adequate yearly progress was defined under the Bush administration's highly unpopular No Child Left Behind law. The idea was to use standardized tests to measure student competence at different grade levels, and see whether their classroom teachers and the schools they attended were developing their academic abilities at a suitable rate. This task has proven almost impossible in a primary/secondary school environment.

The obstacles are even greater in a university environment. Colleges and universities are not accountable to any state or federal authority. Whereas K-12 schools have a single objective, preparing children for college, each college is expected to have a unique mission statement. They are not all trying to do the same thing. And whereas you can impose a testing regime such as the National Assessment Of Educational Progress (NAEP) on K-12 institutions, at the University level you have to beg for permission.

The authors made up getting permission from 24 colleges and universities and had participation from 2322 students. While the institutions are not identified, the authors go into some detail on the efforts they took to make sure that they were representative. Likewise, since participation on the part of the students was voluntary, there is no guarantee that they were representative. The study falls short of the gold standard of random selection of samples, but it is as good as could be done, and the authors are forthright about the limitations of the study and therefore the statistical inferences they can draw.

Their measurement instrument, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or CLA, was devised to measure a person's critical thinking ability. It presents a hypothetical situation which requires the examinee to read a number of documents, draw a conclusion, and present a written analysis. While this type of test is a better representation of real world problems than a multiple-choice test, its subjectivity makes it more difficult to grade, and leaves it open to quibbling about questions of bias, applicability, and so on. Once again, it isn't perfect but it is as good as can be done. The authors expect, and I likewise expect, other researchers to develop the CLA assessment concept further. It is something like the recent addition of essays to the college board SATs and graduate record exam (GRE).

The authors acknowledge support from a wide range of institutional players, such as the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford foundation, the Lumina foundation and others. This subjects them to certain protocols of political correctness. To be specific, they could not have included intelligence as one of their independent variables even if they wanted to. Secondary schools do not measure it, and nobody wants to hear about it. Intelligence is defined as ability to learn; the precise variable that they want. Instead,

they had to make do with the closest available proxies, SAT test scores and grade point averages. In the end, they knowingly echo some of the errors of No Child Left Behind, asking whether or not colleges and universities are doing a good job of educating children without asking precisely the degree to which those children are able to learn. To their credit, they acknowledge this limitation.

Their conclusion is that colleges and universities generally do a poor job with the resources they are given in the way of faculty salaries and students to educate. Teaching is often a low priority for faculty, especially compared with research. Student evaluations played a large role in faculty tenure and compensation. There is an incentive not to ask the students to learn. The faculty and students make a compact: the faculty entertains the students and does not ask much of them, gives them good grades, and the students give high evaluations to the faculty.

One strong conclusion from the study is that collaborative learning is not effective. The more time the student spends studying with others, the less they actually learn. The key factors in improving critical thinking ability are the time spent studying, studying alone, the number of pages of assigned reading per week, and the number of pages of assigned writing per semester. The standards are appallingly low. Many students get through college never having been asked to read 40 pages a week in any course, or having been asked to write 20 pages over the course of a semester for any single course. Without practice in these critical skills, it is no wonder that they do not improve them.

A surprising outcome in this study is that whites and Hispanics do better than Asians. Most studies of academic performance in the United States show Asians outperforming every other group. This suggests to me that the authors are right in saying that more work needs to be done.

Lastly, it is good to see another book by Richard Arum. *Judging School Discipline*, which came out in 2005, was an excellent analysis of the effects of the public schools' conceding their moral authority over the past few decades. When you cannot enforce discipline, you cannot teach. *Academically Adrift* retains some of that flavor. When college students are treated as consumers, and the college has no moral authority to even suggest to them how to spend their time, how to study, or how to live, it is not surprising that they do not get as much out of the college experience as their parents did, and as those parents might expect.